

Screen



New Feminist Work:

Memory

Male trouble

Clothes

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Screen Studies Conference

Glasgow, 30 June - 2 July 1995

This year the conference will focus on issues of **performance** and **music** and will overlap with the biennial conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, which is to be organized around the topic of *Music on Show* and will run 1 - 6 July.

2 July will be a joint day with IASPM on
'Popular music on and off the screen'.

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Hollywood memories

JACKIE STACEY

1 For a comprehensive debate about the multiple meanings of the category 'the female spectator', see *Camera Obscura*, nos 20/21 (1989).

2 Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: 'Gone With The Wind' and its Female Fans* (London: Virago, 1989); Jacqueline Bobo, 'The Color Purple: Black women as cultural readers', in E. Deidre Pribram (ed.), *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (London: Verso, 1988); Angela Partington, 'Consumption practices as the production and articulation of differences: rethinking working-class femininity in 1950s Britain' (unpublished PhD: University of Birmingham, 1990); Janet Thumim, *Celluloid Sisters: Women and Popular Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1992); Annette Kuhn, 'Researching popular film fan culture in 1930s Britain', in *Historical Studies of Film Reception* (Oslo: Norwegian Universities Press, 1994 forthcoming).

3 'Historical Methodologies' was the title of the opening plenary panel at the Screen Studies Conference 1993, at which an earlier version of this essay was presented. For discussions of this

The absence of 'woman' from Hollywood cinema has been a central concern within feminist film criticism for many years now; and I want to continue the investigation of this case of 'the missing woman'. My struggle, however, is not with the absence of certain screen images, but with the absence of the audience from both cinema history and feminist film criticism. The missing woman in the context of this article, then, is that slippery category 'the female spectator'.¹ How can we go about trying to trace this missing woman, and what methodological issues might such a search raise? After twenty years of feminist film theories preoccupied mainly with textual spectatorship, there is now an increasing interest in actual cinema audiences. Work by women such as Helen Taylor, Jacqueline Bobo, Angela Partington, Janet Thumim and Annette Kuhn has begun to investigate how texts might be read by particular audiences at particular times.²

My interest in questions of historical methodology³ arises out of my own research with the memories of a particular group of female spectators of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood cinema. The women whose memories are used in this study are all white British women, mostly in their sixties and seventies (though ranging in age from forty-plus to over ninety), and are readers of the two leading women's magazines *Woman's Weekly* and *Woman's Realm*, through which I initially contacted them. The focus of this research is the relationships between female film stars of this period and their female spectators. Letters and questionnaires from over 350 women containing their memories of favourite Hollywood stars form the basis of the study, though I also draw on other historical sources in the longer version of this study.⁴ My concern here is with how

subject within film studies, see Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Thumim, *Celluloid Sisters*.

4 Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994).

5 Valerie Walkerdine, 'Video replay: families, films and fantasy', in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 171.

female spectators' memories might be used as a source for historical studies of cinema and the methodological issues raised by their use.

The focus is obviously on *past* cinema audiences, though many of the methodological issues raised pertain to all kinds of audience research. For just as we cannot view history as a straightforward retrieval of past time, neither can audience research ever capture that 'pure' moment of reception, what Valerie Walkerdine has called the 'magic convergence'.⁵ The methodological complexities of audience research are merely amplified when we begin to investigate audiences from previous decades. After all, in one sense, the 'audiences' of the 1940s and the 1950s no longer exist: that originary moment of spectatorship is lost and can never be recaptured. However, the fact that audiences' accounts of their experiences are inevitably retrospective representations is a methodological issue for any 'ethnographic' audience research. A critical analysis of the forms and processes of memory, then, is pertinent to all ethnographic studies of audiences. However, in historical research, the length of the gap between the events and their recollection (in my own research, some forty or fifty years) highlights especially sharply the question of processes of memory formation.

The memories produced by these female spectators in the letters and questionnaires they sent me are structured through certain codes and conventions. Like other kinds of texts, these memories present an identifiable set of generic features. In this part of my article, I want to discuss briefly two of these genres of memory formation, before going on to analyze the dialogic exchange through which they are produced.

The first genre I call *iconic memory*. Memories of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood frequently take the form of a particular 'frozen moment', a moment removed from its temporal context and captured as 'pure image': be it of Bette Davis's flashing eyes, Rita Hayworth's flowing hair, or Doris Day's 'fun' outfits. A memory of 'love at first sight' is typical of this genre. Here religious signifiers articulate the special status of the star and the intensity of this moment:

I'll never forget the first I saw her, it was in *My Gal Sal* in 1942, and her name was Rita Hayworth. I couldn't take my eyes off her, she was the most perfect woman I had ever seen. The old cliché of 'screen goddess' was used about many stars, but those are truly the only words that define that divine creature. . . . I was stunned and amazed that any human being could be that lovely. (Violette Holland)

Iconic memories are not only produced as memories of the stars: they can also be spectators' memories of themselves in such 'frozen moments':

6 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

7 Jackie Stacey, entry on 'Romance', in Annette Kuhn (ed.), with Susannah Radstone, *The Women's Companion to International Film* (London: Virago, 1990), pp. 345-6; and Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce, 'The heart of the matter', in Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Romance Revisited* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994 forthcoming).

Our favourite cinema was the Ritz – with its deep pile carpet and double sweeping staircase. Coming down one always felt like a Hollywood heroine descending into the ballroom. (Anon)

The frequent recurrence of this form of memory might be explained by the centrality of the idea of 'image' in the definition of 'successful' femininity in patriarchal culture. Given the extent to which female stars function in Hollywood cinema through their status as objects of visual pleasure, it is hardly surprising that iconic memory features so centrally in these accounts.⁶

The second genre of memory which occurs most frequently is *narrative memory*. Narrative memories present temporally located sequential stories of cinemagoing in the 1940s and 1950s. As well as remembering particular narratives featuring their favourite screen idols, these spectators also recreate their own relationships to the stars through narrative forms of memory. These memories of Hollywood stars are often specific forms of self-narrativization in relation to cultural ideals of femininity. These spectators construct themselves as heroines of their remembered narratives, which in turn deal with their own cinema heroines of that time. Memories of Hollywood stars are thus represented through the narrative structures which connect the self to the ideal. This next memory reworks the conventions of the romance narrative, for example, giving a homoerotic charge to the pleasures of female spectatorship:

In the late 1930s, when I was about nine or ten, I began to be aware of a young girl's face appearing in magazines and newspapers. I was fascinated. The large eyes, full mouth, sometimes the wonderful smile, showing the slightly prominent but perfect teeth. I feel rather irritated that I don't recall the moment when I realised that the face belonged to a lovely singing voice beginning to be heard on the radio record programmes. . . . The face and the voice belonged to Deanna Durbin. . . . In the 1940s at the age of twelve I was evacuated from my house in South London to Looe in Cornwall, and it was there I was first taken to the pictures for a special treat. There at last I saw her. The film, a sequel to her first, was *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*. The effect she had on me can only be described as electrifying. I had never felt such a surge of adoration before. . . . My feeling for her was no passing fancy. . . . (Patricia Robinson)

The structure of this first 'meeting' or, rather, first sighting is built around a series of enigmas, or absences, typical of the romance genre:⁷ the anonymous face whose details are 'unforgettable', the voice on the radio, the lost moment when face and voice are matched together, and the gradual buildup to the culmination when 'there at last I saw her'. The star's screen appearance signifies closure, and yet, true to generic conventions, this moment of ending simultaneously suggests the beginning of a lifetime's devotion.

Several memories combine narrative and iconic elements. These two genres frequently construct each other: iconic memories may be of a narrative image from a particular film, for example; and many of the iconic memories, such as the fantasy of being a Hollywood heroine descending the cinema staircase, are also narrativized. Visual display is the common current running through many of these memory formations. Significantly, each of the processes of memory formation and selection I have discussed so far replicates, and is replicated by, distinguishing features of Hollywood cinema. Popular memories of Hollywood cinema in these accounts thus take cinematic forms. Memories are typically constructed through key icons, significant moments, narrative structures and heroic subject positions. These examples demonstrate how the past is produced in the present through visual and narrative conventions replicating their historical object: cinema.

. . . the life of any text – case history or otherwise – is not generated by itself, but through the act of being read.⁸

. . . the intervention of the historian . . . is of crucial significance . . . as a catalyst for whole process of structured remembrance.⁹

Having identified some of the formations of memory in my study, I want now to consider the role of the research process, and indeed the researcher, in their production. I would suggest that this type of audience research involves ‘a dialogic exchange’ in which the fantasies researcher and respondents have about each other have a determining effect on the accounts produced. The ‘imagined reader’ structures the forms of memory offered and, to a greater or lesser extent, is present within the texts themselves. Integral to an understanding of the textuality of these memories, then, is a recognition of the dialogicality of textual production. Here, audience researchers might usefully draw upon insights from dialogic theory which emphasize the ways in which texts are always produced *for readers*; indeed the imagined reader can be seen as written into particular textual modes of address.¹⁰ This process might be summed up in what Lynne Pearce has recently identified as Voloshinov’s most eloquent expression of addressivity:

Orientation of the word toward the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, *word is a two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and *for whom* it is meant. As word, it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*. Each and every word expresses ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’. I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown between myself and

⁸ History Workshop Journal, ‘Review discussion: *In Search of a Past*: a dialogue with Ronald Fraser’, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 20 (1985), pp. 175–88 (p. 182).

⁹ Popular Memory Group, ‘Popular memory: theory, politics, method’, in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *Making Histories* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 243.

¹⁰ For a discussion of memory forms in oral history, see Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

another. If one end of the bridge belongs to me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his [sic] interlocutor. (Voloshinov's emphasis)¹¹

In her comprehensive account of dialogic theory, Lynne Pearce outlines the significance of Bakhtin's work on the role of the addressee in characterizing various 'speech genres' in which the relationship between speaker and addressee is of crucial significance in understanding meaning:

An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its *addressivity*. . . . Both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addressee, and the force of their effect on the utterance. Each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre. (Voloshinov's emphasis)¹²

Although this theory is derived from speech communication, it has been widely developed in relation to written texts.¹³ Dialogic theory then highlights the subjective, yet social, relations of textual production: the role of the imagined reader in meaning production. It is important here to approach the text as a dialogic form in which the addressee is part of its structure and mode of communication. In audience research the relationship between the academic researcher and interviewees or respondents necessarily shapes which accounts are told and which are not, and indeed how they are told. This mutual (though, importantly, not equal) relationship has been paralleled with that between analyst and analysand in psychoanalysis.¹⁴ For audience research such as this, a more textual model of exchange and interpretation might be appropriate: in either case, though, audiences and researchers may be seen as in a dialogic relationship – one in which the imagined other proves integral to the forms of knowledge produced. Dialogic theories of the reader imagined through the function of addressivity might be used to investigate this textual relationship between audiences and researchers. This model would operate in any kind of audience—researcher exchange. However, in retrospective representations of the past, it functions as a way for respondents to reconstruct their pasts in the present for another who is outside their worlds, but also (and as we shall see, importantly) outside their generation. Here, as work on popular memory has highlighted, the 'centrality of generation . . . [is] a fundamental impulse to remember'.¹⁵ Thus, in this dialogic exchange, some of the processes of memory formation become visible as respondents negotiate their constructions of the past in relation to an imagined reader in the present.

¹¹ V. N. Voloshinov, quoted in Lynne Pearce, *Reading Dialogics* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 43. I am indebted to Lynne Pearce for my understanding and use of dialogic theory in this section.

¹² M. Bakhtin, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 74.

¹³ See, for example, Pearce's own textual readings in this light, *ibid.*

¹⁴ For a discussion of the uses of psychoanalysis in oral history, see Karl Figlio, 'Oral history and the unconscious', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 26 (1988), pp. 120–32; T. G. Ashplant, 'Psychoanalysis in historical writing', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 26 (1988), pp. 102–19; and responding to this work, Jacqueline Rose, 'A comment', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 28 (1989), pp. 149–54.

¹⁵ Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory', p. 246.

Dialogic practices of writing are integral both to my initial invitations to produce a remembered past, which posit an imagined addressee, and also, in turn, to the written responses I received – which embody the projection of an imagined reader: the researcher. In my first communication with respondents, I imagined female fans who had stories to tell about their relationships to Hollywood stars of the past. My advertisement addressed them directly using the second person: ‘Were you a keen cinemagoer of the 1940s and 1950s?’ The ways in which I requested information encouraged women to use narrative forms to construct their memories. My request for letters from women who were keen cinemagoers in the 1940s and 1950s invited retrospective self-narrativizations in the retelling of past events so characteristic of the conventions of letter-writing more generally. Even in the followup questionnaire, a less personal mode of communication, and one associated with ‘scientific’ information-giving rather than with storytelling, the kinds of questions I asked inevitably produced, or at least delimited, the forms of responses. I invited a kind of narrativization of the past, for example, when I asked respondents to ‘describe a favourite cinema experience of the 1940s/1950s’. Finally, I allowed maximum space for the central question in the questionnaire in which respondents were asked to ‘write about your favourite star from the 1940s and then the 1950s, explaining what you liked about them and what they meant to you: what made these stars more appealing than others?’¹⁶ This clearly requested narrativizations of the past and invited a commentary on respondents’ own tastes and preferences.

¹⁶ For the full questionnaire see Stacey, *Star Gazing*, pp. 245–51.

Similarly, respondents signal my presence in their imaginations through a number of textual enunciations. Some use my name to effect a personal mode of address in order to emphasize a specific feeling: ‘Oh Jackie, what lovely memories are being recalled – I do hope you are going to ask for lots more information as a trip down memory lane of this nature is most enjoyable’. (Barbara Forshaw) This example is taken from a letter; the use of my name suggests a familiarity which easily accompanies the letter form, but is normally absent from the relationship of researcher and researched. It also adds a note of authenticity to the exchange which is lacking in more formal types of address, suggesting a personal sharing of experiences ‘between friends’. The depth of the emotion felt about the research project is given wistful exclamation here in the ‘oh’ as well as in the use of my name. My role in this dialogic exchange is thus included in the text itself as this respondent pauses to reflect upon the pleasures of remembering the ‘Golden Age of Hollywood’. My obviously ‘younger’ generation name, in contrast to many of the respondents’ names (such as ‘Vera’, ‘Mabel’ or ‘Betty’) which connote a very different generation, placed me outside the experience of ‘Hollywood at its best’: this produced a further imperative to convey to me the importance of Hollywood stars in

their lives at that time, the significance of changes in the cinema since then, and the depth of the loss they mourn. Several respondents used stereotyped or clichéd language to describe Hollywood stars of this era: 'stars of yesteryear', 'screen goddesses' and 'a trip down memory lane'. These and many other similar examples construct a special relationship to the past (through a direct knowledge of it, and use of dated language about it) for an imagined reader of a different generation.

In the role of 'invisible other' outside the memories, yet as the person for whom they are being produced, my position might be seen as equivalent to Bakhtin's 'superaddressee': 'the hypothetical presence who fully comprehends the speaker's words and hence allows his or her utterance to be made despite doubt about whether the "actual" addressee will understand and/or respond'.¹⁷ As 'superaddressee' the researcher (by requesting them and then reading them) brings these memories into being, as it were. However, an ambivalence towards my role in this respect is also articulated; there is a feared mismatch between the ideal reader's and my actual position, for many respondents expressed anxiety about my not understanding the full significance of these memories (because I had not been there). The question of power imbalances between researcher and researched is central here. Straddling the roles of superaddressee and imagined addressee, I am expected to exercise authority over these memories (by representing them for publication, for example) – and indeed, this authority is seen in turn to 'authorize' these memories. However, my relationship to the material is also constantly under negotiation within the texts, as respondents establish their own authority about the Hollywood stars of the past over and above my own, and try to ensure that I make the correct readings of their memories.

In offering narrative accounts of the past, many respondents tell their stories and then add their own reflections upon them, as if anticipating the reader's response. This 'anticipatory mode' functions as a mediating voice which moves between the subject positions of 'self' and 'imagined other', producing a particular type of dialogicality in which reflexivity foregrounds the role of the addressee. The 'love at first sight' story about Deanna Durbin quoted above, for instance, ends with a shift of register in which the respondent comments directly on a possible (and within contemporary critical debates, virtually inevitable) interpretation of her love of Deanna Durbin. Continuing directly from the quotation above, she writes:

I might just add that the members of our society [the Deanna Durbin Society] seem to be about equal in number male and female. I think perhaps it would be considered a bit of a giggle today, if a large number of women confessed to feeling love for a

17 Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, p. 76.

girl. Nobody seemed to question it then. Just in case: I have been married since 1948! Have two sons and a daughter, one grandchild. (Patricia Robinson)

In writing about her devotion to a star of the same sex, this respondent feels the need to guard against possible interpretations of homoeroticism in this charged connection. Heterosexuality and reproduction are thus invoked to counter such speculations: a grandchild is even mentioned as if to stress the 'purity' and 'normality' not just of the respondent's desires, but also the next generation's. In the retelling, then, the presence of a (younger) imagined reader produces an anxiety about the story's significance today which needs to be defended against. A contrast is constructed between the 'innocence' of such an attachment in the past, and the embarrassment of 'confessing' it in today's culture in which homosexual interpretations might be more freely applied to such a declaration. Externalizing this memory of the 1930s and 1940s for a researcher in the 1980s, this respondent is brought up against a clash between present knowledge and past self: the former suggesting a different interpretation of the latter. If such a reading has occurred to the respondent's present self, she (quite correctly) anticipates its coincidence with my response to her story. Appealing against today's sexualization of such desires, she articulates concern that her memory may be spoiled or 'corrupted' by such discourses. Thus the reflection upon the account is produced in direct dialogue with the addressee, whose different values, or indeed desires, are imagined and incorporated into the account, and function to mediate between past and present discourses of sexuality and fandom.

An even more explicit extension of this anticipatory mode of addressivity occurs in the following example. Here, another respondent's account seems to be in dialogue not only with me, but also with herself, or rather with a version of her 'former selves'. Initially, an account is offered of how female stars functioned as role models for new fashions: 'We were quick to notice any change in fashion and whether it had arrived this side of the Atlantic. We were pleased to see younger stars without gloves and hats – we soon copied them'. However, this is followed by a self-conscious autocritique of the cultural construction of such feminine desirability:

In retrospect, it's easy to see Hollywood stars for what they really were. This was pretty packaged commodities . . . the property of a particular studio. At the time I did most of my filmgoing, while I was always aware that stars were really too good to be true, I fell as completely under the spell of the Hollywood 'Dream Factory' as any other girl of my age. . . . Looking back, I can see much of what I took as authenticity was really technical skill. . . . Later on I realised just how much money and expertise went into

creating the 'natural' beauties the female stars appeared to be.
(Kathleen Lucas)

Throughout a long and very detailed reflection in answer to the central question about the appeal of particular stars in the 1940s and 1950s, this respondent shifts between a past self who was 'under the spell of Hollywood' and a present 'critical' self, producing an important contrast which might be seen to be in dialogue, as it were, with the reader/researcher. This example is exceptional rather than typical, and its particular form of dialogicality is due in part to the respondent's experience of similar research with the Mass-Observation Archive at Sussex University, to which she herself draws my attention in a covering letter. The self-commentary is offered here in response to an expected, even previously experienced, authoritative interpretation which might be imposed on these memories: the feminist critique is thus successfully anticipated and given voice in dialogue with the imagined researcher reading this account. As part of the same account she writes: 'Make-up artists were clever enough not to show the female stars as too artificial. The servicemen didn't want to see anything but a parade of glamour queens, so the make-up men aimed for a naturally perfect, or perfectly natural look'. Drawing attention to the power imbalances between researcher and researched, she correctly anticipates certain contemporary feminist critiques of stardom, glamour and 'the male gaze', and yet insists upon the pleasures for female spectators nevertheless: 'Really we were conned, but in the nicest possible way', she concludes.

Both these accounts might be seen as examples of what Bakhtin calls 'double-voiced discourse': this includes all speech 'which not only refers to something in the world but which also refers to another speech act by another addressee'.¹⁸ The most obvious types of double-voiced discourse operating in these examples are what Bakhtin calls 'hidden dialogue' or 'hidden polemic' in which the narrator actively engages with an 'interlocutor not named in the text, but whose presence may be inferred'.¹⁹ This inferred other outside the text may be a discourse as well as a known, or unknown, subject. In the case of hidden polemic, the inferred subject or discourse is seen as potentially antagonistic or hostile, which is not the case in hidden dialogue. Both the above examples present interesting dialogues with inferred others: each might be characterized as in dialogue with a discourse via my imagined subject position. Interestingly, despite never having met me, each narrator anticipates my concern with contemporary discourses of sexuality. In the Deanna Durbin example, for instance, the respondent both positions herself as the imagined reader of her own account, and comments upon the nature of her passion for this female star, whilst simultaneously defending against my also making

¹⁸ David Lodge, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁹ Pearce, *ibid.*, p. 53.

such a comment and so constructing her desires within what she would consider a 'perverse' reading of her memories.

Similarly, in the last example, the respondent both produces an account of the 'mindless escapism of Hollywood of the past'; and yet, not wanting to be constructed as naive, also draws attention to the critique of such pleasures. In this case, the hidden polemic is not only with a potential feminist critique of Hollywood cinema, but also with a form of 'high culture' scorn for popular pleasures: her own ambivalence articulates precisely the complexity of the relationship between these two discourses. To offer one final example from this same account, which illustrates this exchange perfectly:

Everything was rationed and shabby, then along came the glamour and expertise of Hollywood and we soaked it up like a sponge. It 'took people out of themselves' and transported them to a plane where they didn't need to think or worry. All they had to do was sit and stare. And the top Hollywood studios knew exactly what people wanted to see and they gave it to them. In a word, people needed 'escapism'. (Kathleen Lucas)

The repeated use of inverted commas, and the third, as well as the first person plural, produce a critical distance from the experience (this is something other people felt) whilst also including herself in it. The earlier reference to Hollywood as a 'Dream Factory' further reinforces this distance by invoking (knowingly?) a well-known sociological study of the American film industry.²⁰

Thus, a contrast and mediation between past and present selves represented in these accounts is constructed through forms of dialogue with the researcher: it is, in part, my imagined presence in their texts which facilitates respondents' commentary and reflection upon their 'past selves' from the point of view of their present knowledges. In both the above examples, this anticipatory mode of addressivity not only incorporates me into the text as an imagined reader from another generation, but my anticipated construction of respondents' own identity is also projected into the text. Thus, not only is there a dialogue here between self and imagined other, but what might more accurately be described as a 'trialogic' relationship between self, imagined other and imagined other's fantasy of the self: in other words, the respondents, their projection of me and, finally completing this 'trialogic circuit', how they imagine my reading of their texts will in turn produce a version of their identities. Indeed this 'third person presence' might be seen to characterize certain '*dynamics* of the dialogic context' if, as Pearce suggests, 'dialogues can be between more than two persons'.²¹

One of the 'inferred presences' of these hidden polemics is an evaluative discourse about popular culture and female pleasure in it. These negotiations of the researcher's anticipated responses, then, highlight particularly sharply the question of the value placed on

²⁰ Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1950).

²¹ Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, pp. 202–3.

female pleasures in these forms of popular culture: how should my 'invitation to remember' such pleasures be received – as a promise of their validation or as a threat of their condemnation? Either way, an anxiety about this question is clearly present in many of the responses I received, since, after all, I have the power to interpret and comment upon these texts and to represent them to (another) public. Kathleen Lucas is unusual in offering an autocritique of 'female fandom', but typical in so far as her memories are produced in relation to the *idea* of a judgement of such pleasures. For many respondents, my anticipated response is assumed to be an acknowledgment of the importance of their memories through their inclusion in 'cinema history', contradicting the usual derision they receive within patriarchal culture. Indeed, many offer accounts of how such attachments have been trivialized and not considered suitable for a 'mature' woman. Commenting on her brother's response to her collection of photographs of British and Hollywood stars, one woman writes:

I had pictures of Patricia Roc, Margaret Lockwood, Petula Clarke, Jeanette McDonald, Dulcie Gray and my favourite, best loved of all – Margaret O'Brien! We used to send for photographs to MGM and RKO. . . . I'm afraid my brother cleared all 'that sort of rubbish' (his words, not mine) from my late mother's house before I was able to get there. (Cynthia Mulliner)

This respondent is keen to distance herself from the masculine trivialization of her much-loved collection by highlighting the gulf between his use of derisive language and her attachment to her belongings. Furthermore, her sense of regret is emphasized in the final phrase, 'before I was able to get there', suggesting the possibility of retrieval had the timing been different.

For others, the loss of such valued collections is attributed to World War II, the key event associated with loss during this period:

I had a wonderful collection of personally autographed photos, mostly with my name written on them. Unfortunately, they went when my home was bombed during the war and I have been sad about this ever since. No personal loss has had so much effect on me as the loss of this collection (started when I was a schoolgirl). (Mrs M. Caplin)

I wish I still had some of my magazines. My copies of *Photoplay* were immaculate – they were *never* loaned to *anybody*. I kept most of them for years, but unfortunately when the war came, they were discarded during my absence in the forces – much to my rage and frustration. (Mrs J. Kemp) (emphasis in original)

The most common explanation for change in spectators' attachments to the cinema at this time, however, is marriage – which

marked the end of many female spectators' devotion to female stars. These accounts represent a shift in acceptability of such feelings for Hollywood stars:

It amazes me to think of what choice of Picture Houses we had. I can remember at least twelve. You could go every night and see a different picture. And they were always full, with queues outside. We spent most of our Bank Holiday afternoons queuing to see Doris Day. But after I was married, we were rationed to once a week. (Jean Shepherd)

At the time (1945) there was a film magazine called *Picturegoer* and I loved this book, but it was also a time of shortages, so one could only get this magazine from under the counter and also if you were a regular customer of that particular shop. When I discovered I could obtain this item I used to cycle like crazy from my work in the dinner time, just to obtain this film star book. I drove my poor Mum potty with all the cuttings plastered all over my bedroom walls and my masses of scrapbooks. I even dreamed of being an usherette. . . . I stopped going to the pictures after I was married and had a family. (Mrs M. Russell)

In a few examples, mothers are blamed for not recognizing the significance of such collections (thought perhaps they were thrown away precisely because such significance seemed inappropriate):

I left home in 1953 on marriage and lived in a minute flat in London. By the time we could afford more space, my mother had dumped the things she thought a married woman didn't need. I found it hard to forgive her. (Anon)

All these stories point to respondents' feelings of a previous lack of recognition of the importance of film stars in their lives. Anger, betrayal and regret are expressed at the discrepancy between female spectators' high valuation of these photos and scrapbooks and other people's ridicule of them. Furthermore, marriage functions as a key boundary between 'girlhood' in which such attachments might be permissible and 'adulthood' in which such devotions might conflict with more 'appropriate' ones: 'When the time came to distinguish between "Childhood" and "Growing-Up", I must have destroyed as many as fifty books full'. (Avril Feltham) This construction of attachments to Hollywood stars of the same sex as immature, naive, foolish or even perverse, draws on a number of discourses of femininity and feminine sexuality in which the adoption of a man as the central love object signifies heterosexual maturity. In all these accounts, respondents articulate an ambivalent desire for recognition of the significance of these same-sex attachments as more than simply schoolgirl crushes or regressive narcissism, whilst simultaneously guarding against my criticism of their Hollywood

passions: this they half-expect because they are so familiar with contempt from external critics, be these family, friends, husbands or researchers. Thus, running throughout many of these accounts is a dialogue with the imagined reader about the validity of indulging in such reminiscences of these 'silly' feminine pleasures.²² Indeed, many express their own anxieties about the worth of their memories for cinema history, echoing the remembered questionability of their validity as a cultural experience at the time: several accounts finish with comments such as 'I can't imagine this is of much use to you' or 'I hope I have been of some help' and 'I can't see that my ramblings will be of great significance'.

Some respondents, however, took my research request for their memories to be a guarantee of recognition of previously low-status or stigmatized feelings about female stars. For example, an account of a previously discredited attachment to Doris Day implies a welcome contrast between past ridicule and my anticipated response. The direct address ('I wanted to write and tell you') suggests a sharing of a confidence with the expectation of an understanding reader:

I wanted to write and tell you of my devotion to Doris Day. I thought she was fantastic, and joined her fan club, collected all the photos and info I could. I saw *Calamity Jane* 45 times in a fortnight and still watch all her films avidly. My sisters all thought I was mad going silly on a woman, but I just thought she was wonderful. . . . My sisters were all mad about Elvis, but my devotion was to Doris Day. (Veronica Mills)

The contrast to her sisters' attachments to Elvis, the epitome of smouldering heterosexual masculinity, suggests the unacceptability of the homoerotic connotations of this respondents' devotion. Previously dismissed as immature and trivial (she was considered 'mad' to be going 'silly' on a woman), these feelings towards a female star have not been recognized as significant since they lack the seriousness of mature heterosexual love. The dialogicality of this text is not just in relation to my position as imagined reader, then, but also in a 'hidden polemic' with her sisters; contesting her sisters' definition of her attachment to Doris Day as 'mad', the narrator defines it instead as 'devotion' and uses the (interestingly ambiguous) former term to refer to their love of Elvis.

These memories of cinematic spectatorship are thus constructed through forms of private storytelling which are given public recognition in the research process. Like many confessional acts, although utilizing so-called private forms, they are nevertheless written for another: for a kind of public consumption, first by me, the researcher; and secondly, once in print, by a wider audience. Indeed, perhaps the desire for recognition or validation of these previously low-status feelings is one reason why some of these female spectators offered their memories in a rather confessional

mode. The disclosure of secret loves, private collections and lifetime devotions suggests that for some respondents the research process might function as a kind of 'secular confessional'. Perhaps my initial invitation to remember feelings towards female stars of the past belongs to a more general cultural imperative which encourages 'confession'. As Foucault has pointed out:

We have become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, the things people write books about.²³

²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 59.

In describing some of these accounts as confessional, I do not mean to criticize the self-disclosures offered in this research process, but rather to comment on one particular form of articulation in the dialogic exchange between researcher and researched. As Rita Felski has pointed out, the use of the term 'confession' has sometimes 'acquired slightly dismissive overtones in recent years'; however, for her the confessional text is simply a subgenre of women's autobiography which 'makes public that which has been private'.²⁴ In the context of this research the making public of that which has been private is effected through producing written memories for someone else, someone invested with a certain amount of power and credibility. As a 'researcher', my academic status might in turn invest these memories with a weight and importance they are felt to lack. Confession might be understood here as a form of dialogics, for confession hinges on the idea of an addressee. According to Foucault we always confess to someone else, usually someone who represents authority:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it

²⁴ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), pp. 87–8.

- 25 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 62. I am grateful to Hilary Hinds for drawing my attention to these passages on confession.

exonerates, redeems, and purifies him [sic]; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him and promises him salvation.²⁵

The invitation to tell one's story to a researcher may offer the promise of being heard, recognized, and taken seriously. What makes this study particularly appealing as a 'confessional opportunity' is the way in which the act of confession itself elevates the material into significance. It thus offers the chance to (re)gain the (lost) status of certain emotions from the past. For what surfaces repeatedly in these narratives is the desire to recapture past pleasures which were either 'laughable' to begin with (as in the Doris Day example), or which have since lost their status (with marriage or maturity). The subsequent discrediting of attachments to female stars, then, seems to cast doubt on their original validity. In addition to changes in the film industry and the star system through which stars are perceived to have lost their earlier idol status, life history changes also mean the loss of status of earlier attachments to stars. These are combined in the desire to return to past moments and revalue them through the external recognition anticipated in the research process. This dialogical exchange thus promises an imagined transformation in the cultural status of emotional connections to Hollywood stars, resolving the discrepancy between respondents' own valuation, and others' trivialization, of these feminine popular pleasures.

*For memory is, by definition, a term which directs our attention not to the past but to the past-present relation.*²⁶

*Memory alone cannot resurrect past time, because it is memory itself that shapes it, long after historical time has passed.*²⁷

- 26 Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory', p. 211.

- 27 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 29.

The dialogic analysis in the previous section highlights especially sharply the processes of memory in reworking past identities in relation to the present, and vice versa. Through these multiple dialogues, respondents are able to shift between past and present identities in their imaginations, and use my inferred presence to facilitate such temporal shifts. The dialogic exchanges function to produce both a dialogue with an imagined reader in the present, and also numerous other dialogues with discourses and interlocutors from the remembered past. These, it is argued, can only be understood in terms of 'the way in which popular memories are constructed and reconstructed as part of a *contemporary* consciousness'.²⁸ Popular memory theory therefore stresses the significance of the present as the standpoint from which remembered accounts are produced.

Why, then, do certain memories figure repeatedly in some people's accounts of the past, and how do such memories function

- 28 Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory', p. 219.

²⁹ Popular Memory Group, unpublished papers on popular memory (University of Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, n.d.).

as touchstones in their self-narrativizations? Certain memories, it has been suggested, have a particular function in processes of identity formation. Memories in which we have an enduring and recurring personal investment in terms of our identities have been called *treasured memories*.²⁹ Many respondents in my research wrote of such treasured memories and of their continuing significance: 'I have memories I shall always treasure. Other things in life take over, visiting the cinema is nil these days, but I shall always remember my favourite films and those wonderful stars of yesteryear'. (Mrs B. Morgan) Such treasured memories might be likened to a valued personal possession: an object of vast sentimental significance to the self, but a worthless trinket to others; that is, until the audience researcher revalues it, as it were. Here memories of Hollywood stars are a kind of personal cinema memorabilia. These fantasy objects are not only treasured by respondents, but also anticipated to be valuable proof of their own credentials as cinema historians:

The major film stars of my major film-going period made a big impact on me. I can see a short clip from a film and know instantly whether I've seen it before or not – and as like or not, be able to add – 'then she moves off down the staircase' or 'the next dress she appears in is white with puffy net sleeves'. (M. Palin)

Indeed, it has been argued that treasured memories are particularly significant in conserving a fantasy of a past self and thereby guarding against loss.³⁰ Treasured memories may thus signify past selves or imagined selves which have also become important retrospectively. The notion of the treasured memory also suggests a place which can be regularly revisited. One woman writes:

My grandfather's boss was kind enough to, every Christmas of my childhood, give me a present of a film annual. I enjoyed them then, but never dreamt what a treasure trove they'd prove to be. Now in my 50's, I pore over them from time to time and it's like opening Pandora's Box [sic]. Stars of yesteryear, long forgotten. Films I saw, but had forgotten all about. Hollywood at its height, the glitz and glamour. . . . (Barbara McWinter)

How might these treasured memories be understood as investments in particular versions of the past? One explanation might be that these memories represent particular 'transformative moments' in the spectator's life history.³¹ Such moments are especially pertinent to the film star-spectator relationship because Hollywood stars embody cultural ideals of femininity and represent to spectators the possibility of transforming the self. Indeed, many memories pinpoint the role of Hollywood stars in the changes in spectators' own identities. This is partly due to the power of the discourse of transformation in the feminine life history, in which

³⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

³¹ Ibid., p. 161.

adolescence prefigures a fundamental change. Many respondents' memories are of a transitional period: their 'teenage' years, in which change and self-transformation were central to their desires and aspirations; and cinema is remembered as a transitional space in which the fantasy of possible futures is played out.

The moment I took my seat it was a different world, plush and exciting, the world outside was forgotten. I felt grown up and sophisticated. (Betty Cruse)

It has been suggested that the pleasure of such memories derives from the ways they work as 'personal utopias', offering escape from the present. This is particularly pertinent with regard to spectators' memories of Hollywood stars, who seem to offer the most utopian fantasies to *female* spectators.³² In this context, femininity itself might be seen as the ultimate utopian identity: an impossible ideal, predicated upon loss through its very embodiment in the *visual* image. The kinds of personal utopias produced depend upon past expectations and the extent to which these expectations have been met: some memories, in other words, retain a central emotional importance because of frustrations, disappointments and unfulfilled hopes. Furthermore, certain memories perhaps assume especial significance because they are 'stories of unfinished business'.³³ The degree of emotional investment in a memory may have to do with the extent to which the narrativization of a past self represents an aspect of identity with continuing significance in the present. Indeed, femininity might itself be regarded as 'unfinished business', since its production is quite literally never-ending.

Female spectators' youthful expectations and subsequent experiences of romance, motherhood or paid work, for example, may shape their reconstructions of past attachments to Hollywood ideals of femininity. Given the 'impossibility of femininity', such feelings may be especially pertinent to an understanding of these memories.³⁴ Feminine ideals are unrealizable, not only because of the fragility of the image, but also because they are often fundamentally contradictory (as, for example, ideals of motherhood and of sexual desirability). Furthermore, as Carolyn Steedman has shown, material constraints in certain periods in women's lives may shape investments in particular memories. This is especially pertinent in the context of 1950s consumerism and the 'age of affluence'.³⁵ Memories of Hollywood stars, as retrospective constructions of past time in which feminine identity still seemed realizable in the future, may have particular significance for female spectators as representations of a fantasy self never realized.

These occasions offer opportunities to reassess the past, in the light of subsequent experience and new information, in both personal

³² Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and utopia', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, Volume II (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 220–32; see also Stacey, *Star Gazing*, pp. 80–125.

³³ Popular Memory Group, unpublished papers, p. 30.

³⁴ Stacey, *Star Gazing*, pp. 212–7.

³⁵ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*.

terms ('when I was') and a past-present relation, and involve a constant process of reworking and transforming remembered experience.³⁶

³⁶ Graham Dawson and Bob West, 'Our finest hour?': the popular memory of World War II and the struggle over national identity', in Geoff Hurd (ed.), *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London: British Film Institute, 1984), pp. 10–11.

³⁷ Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory', p. 243.

³⁸ Graham Dawson, 'History-writing on World War II', in Hurd, *National Fictions*.

³⁹ For an account of the psychoanalytic arguments about gender and nostalgia, see Susannah Radstone, 'Remembering Medea: the uses of nostalgia', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1993), pp. 54–63; 'Remembering ourselves: memory, writing and the female self', in Penny Florence and Deidre Reynolds (eds), *Feminist Subjects, Multi-Media: New Approaches to Criticism and Creativity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994 forthcoming).

Dialogic negotiations between past and present discourses and subjects are far from neutral. They are often shot through with wistful longing for remembered times, and with desire to recapture a lost sense of possibility: such memories, in other words, are deeply nostalgic. A yearning for an irretrievable lost time characterizes many of the memories in my study. The invitation to produce a remembered past promises the pleasure of an imagined retrieval, but simultaneously reminds respondents of the impossibility of reliving that past. In producing memories, 'people do *relive* certain past events imaginarily, often with peculiar vividness. This may be especially the case for those (for example, the elderly) who have been forced into a marginal position in the economic, cultural and social life of a society, and, fearful of absolute oblivion, have little to lose but their memories.'³⁷

A typical version of the remembered past constructed in many of these Hollywood memories might be understood in relation to what Graham Dawson has referred to as a kind of 'mythic past': 'myth is always in the process of being alluded to, recycled, even controverted . . . yet there is never a moment when it appears *as itself* in pure form'.³⁸ In this respect, nostalgic yearnings for a lost Hollywood and for the 'truly great' stars of the 'Silver Screen' reinforce its mythic status during a 'Golden Age' of cinema which can never be recaptured. The 'genuine' star system is marked off from what came after, the demise of the studio era of Hollywood, in a remembered past in which stars were distant and still functioned as impossible ideals: 'I think in those eras we were more inclined to put stars on a pedestal. They were so far removed from everyday life, they were magical. These days are so ordinary – the magic has gone. Hollywood will never be the same again!' (Kathleen Sines)

This nostalgic pleasure of remembering Hollywood stars of the past has a particular appeal for female spectators because of the ways it connects with cultural constructions of femininity. Feminists using psychoanalytic theory have argued that nostalgia does indeed have a particular gendered appeal and that this is attributable to the significance of early feelings and beliefs about loss in relation to sexual difference.³⁹ However, the gendering of nostalgic desire in these memories hinges on the extent to which femininity is constructed in patriarchal culture as an unattainable visual image of desirability. To present oneself to the world for approval in terms of visible physical attractiveness is the fundamental and the ultimate demand made of femininity. Few women ever overcome the sense of mismatch between self-image and the feminine ideals of physical appearance. Feminine ideals are youthful ones and, being

ephemeral, contain loss even in their rare attainment. The sense of loss evoked by nostalgic desire in these memories is partly bound up with the predication of femininity-as-image upon loss. The feelings of loss, often experienced in the gap between self-image and the currently fashionable ideal image, are deepened and extended as the ideal becomes ever-increasingly an impossibility. For these female spectators, then, nostalgic desire may be bound up with a particular sense of loss rooted in the unattainability of feminine ideals: perhaps it is its particular designation of femininity as image which gives cinematic nostalgia such potency.

Nostalgia is articulated here in relation to several 'lost objects': for a Hollywood of the past when cinema meant so much more than it does today; for a time when star status kept femininity a distant ideal image on the screen; for a former self – younger, more glamorous – who still maintained a fantasy connection to such ideals; for a past in which the future seemed to offer a promise of fulfilment. Nostalgia here is expressed as a yearning for a past in which the remembered self yearned for the future. The missing woman of cinema history and feminist film criticism has multiple references here: she is lost in history; lost in the demise of Hollywood and the star system; lost in the inevitable failure of femininity as desirable image; lost in personal narratives in which youth and feminine ideals no longer offer a promise of fulfilment. This sense of loss is bound up with femininity's cultural construction as an unattainable visual image of desirability, an image which is youthful and so doomed to transience. Memories of Hollywood stars in the 1940s and 1950s evoke nostalgic desire for a lost past, for imagined former identities, and for a time 'when stars were really stars'. Remembering these stars is an acknowledgement of the loss of that time, and yet also a way of guarding against complete loss by recreating the feeling of a past in which the future still held out promise.

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Women, memory and serial melodrama

MIMI WHITE

And then all of a sudden that son comes along that's illegitimate, that so and so doesn't know about, and that kind of stuff.¹

There is a story that circulates about a US daytime serial melodrama – a soap opera. Whether or not it is true is less important, for present purposes, than the way in which it encapsulates a complex set of assumptions about the genre. In the story, it is a routine production day. In one particular scene, a developing relationship is about to ignite into fullblown, onscreen passion when one of the crew members, who has worked on the series for years, abruptly interrupts. He explains that the scene cannot proceed as scripted, since the two characters in question are related: unknown to one another, they are half brother and sister, both the product of long past affairs on the part of the same father. Supposedly, the technician's outburst is the first time anyone connected with the production has recognized the characters' filiation. Embarrassed by this revelation, the producers have to halt shooting and revise their plans for the subsequent fates of these two characters.

The anecdote was first recounted to me over a decade ago to demonstrate that the genre is fundamentally ridiculous. What interests me is the way in which the anecdote belittles the genre by linking narrative concerns and production contexts, but in terms of a story which is basically not credible. According to the anecdote there was a narrative oversight of such grave proportions that a crew member felt compelled to intervene on the set. Of course no union

¹ Quoted by a soap opera viewer in Ellen Seiter et al., "'Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naive': toward an ethnography of soap opera viewers', in Ellen Seiter et al. (eds), *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 235.

technician (let alone a veteran) would ever interrupt the production process about narrative matters in the first place. Moreover, the narrative situation in question is a mainstay of daytime soap opera; it is even in some sense a natural or predictable outcome of the genre's conventions. In both of these ways at least, the anecdote belies its own credibility. The fact that it circulates at all is best understood as symptomatic, rather than as a direct explanation of contempt for the genre (which it nonetheless also conveys).

This essay investigates the concerns expressed by the anecdote as an ephemeral artefact of popular culture, insofar as the implications of the story reference the ongoing working processes of the US television soap opera. It is, of course, difficult to make definitive generalizations about soap opera, especially given the range and variety they assume both within the US and around the world. My discussion draws broadly on the soap opera scholarship which precedes this study, and is centrally based on US television programmes. In the process, I often elide subtleties and distinctions which can be made both between daytime soaps and between daytime and primetime soaps, in the interests of examining larger questions about seriality as a form of history. However, it is important to be aware that there are differences between programmes which compete for viewers during different parts of the day. Moreover, serial melodrama is a protean form in local and global terms, with respect both to production and to reception, with serial melodrama for television being produced in many different countries and with these programmes, including US primetime and daytime soaps, circulating internationally. While the focus of this analysis is US television programmes, the issues raised may travel, with requisite adjustments for local specificities.

Soap operas are long-term narratives, with multiple characters and plot lines involving complex networks of family and community relations. Love and romance within and outside the legal nuclear family dominate these narratives, fully integrated into the varying generic subplots which are subsumed in the soap opera format (including crime stories, Western tales, action-adventure, espionage, medical dramas, and even science fiction). These ongoing narratives are in turn formally or structurally characterized by redundancies, reversals, and discontinuities. All narrative developments are virtually, and usually literally, reversible. Dead and disappeared characters revive and return to these fictional worlds, only to be revealed as clever impostors, who may in turn be exposed as such by the return of the 'real' person. Heroes and heroines transform into villains, while villains transmute into good guys – gradually or suddenly – and back again. Happy couples suffer misunderstandings or changes of heart that tear them apart, only to be brought back together, often years later. The only narrative certainty is that things change, albeit slowly.

2 Ellen Seiter, 'Eco's TV Guide – the soaps', *Tabloid*, no. 5 (1982), pp. 35–43; Christine Gledhill, 'Speculations on the relationship between soap opera and melodrama', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 14, nos 1–2 (1992), pp. 103–24.

3 Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 74–5.

4 For example, *ibid.*, pp. 69–81, and Seiter et al., 'Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naive'.

The distinctive traits of soap opera narrative have been seen as a direct link to melodramatic conventions more generally, especially in their emphasis on emotional and psychologically charged situations as against narrative and linear progression towards a specific end.² As a complicating factor in romance relationships, incest (or its possibility) is one particular effect of the combination of the long-term fictional histories which soaps construct and their narrative focus on interpersonal relations.

There are three major types of relationships between soap opera characters: kinship, romantic, and social. Much of the appeal of soap operas resides in the complexity and overlap among these categories of actual and potential relationships for any particular character. Mistaken parentage has been a stock device in soap operas for decades. On *Guiding Light* the revelation that Quintin McCord was actually the son of Henry Chamberlain reverberated throughout the entire network of character relationships: Vanessa Chamberlain, for example, was transformed from a potential romantic partner to Quintin's half-sister. Enemies can become brothers; sisters, merely close friends; fathers, foster-fathers; and so on – all at the drop of a discovered birth certificate.³

In terms of production, soap opera stories are not controlled and crafted individually, but result from group work. Producers in teams come and go, as do writers; particular storylines and dialogue are parcelled out to part-time and freelance writers. Along with multiple authorship, the production process in soap opera is one place where women have been visible and have received public recognition for their distinction in the field, as creators, producers, and writers. Irna Phillips, Agnes Nixon, and Gloria Monty – to name but three – are particularly well known in this context. Women are also the most commonly recognized demographic audience for the daytime soap opera in particular, though by no means the only audience for either daytime or primetime serial melodrama. Soap opera viewers are considered to be relatively committed to specific programmes and sets of characters. Viewer–programme interaction and fidelity are built over time, in the course of the narrative permutations and variations which constitute the soap opera text. Regular viewers have the ability to carry a vast wealth of information about character relations and past events in their heads. According to many critics, it is this knowledge, the reward of longstanding viewing commitment, that provides one of the major ways in which soap operas are meaningful for their viewers.⁴ At the same time, these viewers are commonly represented as being extraordinarily involved – even to the point of excess – in the characters and stories they encounter. The prototypical soap watcher is popularly depicted as a zealous female fan, who is too involved in the fictions she watches but who,

in her involvement, becomes an interactive participant in the soap opera worlds which capture her imagination.

The anecdote references this larger context – of multiple, fragmented, collective, and institutional authorship in which women have a visible role; and of female viewers whose competency (from long-term memory and valued viewing habits) is undermined by overidentification. It is against this background – most of which is common knowledge in the US, at least among soap opera viewers and scholars – that the anecdote can be interrogated. For in the story it is a male, an ordinary union technician, who carries the programme's fictional history in his head, rather than the producers, executive story editor, or the regular viewers. This is the case despite the fact that soap opera viewers are well known for expressing their opinions about all aspects of programming to producers (and fanzines) in writing, including pointing out contradictions and inconsistencies in plot and character development. According to the anecdote, in all the time the particular potential incest was brewing no one recalled the 'true past' of these characters. The technician himself, presumably aloof to the routine goings-on within the fiction, waited until the last minute to say anything. If indeed he ever said anything at all.

The anecdote suggests that something is amiss from the outset in a narrative form where the storyline gets to the point where a brother and sister are about to embark on a romance. The precise nature of what is wrong remains unspecified: too much romance, too much family, or perhaps simply too much story, generating all those hours of television produced and consumed on a regular basis, accumulating events over the course of years in such a way that it becomes nearly impossible to keep track of what has happened. At the same time, the anecdote signals a problem in the nature of soap opera production and reception if the creators do not know and cannot control what they are doing and if viewers, however regular and loyal, do not remember what they have seen well enough to recognize a gaffe in story development. To complicate matters further, in speaking up the technician assumes a position otherwise associated with the genre's (female) viewers, demonstrating his own knowledge of programme history and an interest in criticizing perceived inconsistencies in its development, just like a regular soap opera fan.

The anecdote thus initiates broadbased questions about history, memory, and gender in relation to serial melodrama on television. What is the nature of fictional continuity as a form of history in a genre known both for longevity and longtime viewers, and for narrative instability and reversibility? Are those who forget history condemned to repeat it? Or can (selective) memory loss and (wilful) amnesia serve as strategic attacks on the strictures of patriarchal domination? In this context I am using history to refer to at least

two trajectories. One of these is a fictional construct, the diegetic histories generated through ongoing production of narratives over time. The second references the lives of the individuals who create and watch the fictional programmes. In both cases, the history at stake is 'everyday history', engaging the contingencies of daily life – both as it is represented on television in the soap opera, and as it is lived by the millions of individuals who watch soap operas. Through its fictions, soap opera produces ideas about time, memory and causality – in short, it constitutes a mode of popular historiography.

This understanding of soap opera narrative as producing a sense of history and continuity has not escaped the notice of previous critics of the medium. On the contrary, the distinction between serial and series television is identified with the singular sense of duration and accumulated experience characteristic of the soap opera. For example, Ien Ang notes that the television serial 'appeals to a historical sense of time'.⁵ But there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of this popular historiography. On the one hand, soap opera projects a sense of longevity and continuity, both within the terms of its own fictions *and* in relation to those who watch. However, at the levels of fiction, representation and spectatorship, this ongoing sense of historical continuity is produced in terms of redundancy, retardation, discontinuity and reversibility.

The salient traits of soap opera narrativity and its concomitant historical sensibility – including the collateral importance of continuity, longevity, memory, discontinuity, redundancy and forgetfulness – are thus constructed from the outset in unstable and contradictory terms. That these characteristic features are simultaneous poses the soap opera as a postmodern historical configuration with both conservative and destabilizing possibilities. In describing soap opera in this way, I am not only signalling its integral place in television as a postmodern apparatus, but also reclaiming the idea of history in relation to postmodern theory. In distinction from theorists who have argued that postmodernism involves the disappearance of history and a loss of memory, I am proposing that despite the absence of master narratives, postmodern popular culture is more adequately understood as proliferating modes of historiography and of historical narrativity.⁶ In this regard, soap opera figures as a preeminent example, as it projects history in persistent if contradictory terms. This includes substantially increasing the mechanisms for circulating its histories, fictional or not. While this radically alters the nature of history and historical narrativity, it is hardly equivalent to the disappearance or loss of history.

Crucially, the attributes of soap opera's postmodern historicity are discernible as formal narrative strategies and as exemplary viewer behaviours.⁷ Moreover, they are overdetermined by complex relations of the genre to its particular production/reception context.

5 Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Couling (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 52.

6 For a more detailed overview of television and postmodern historiography see James Schwoch, Mimi White and Susan Reilly, *Media Knowledge: Readings in Popular Culture, Pedagogy, and Critical Citizenship* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 1–20.

7 For example, Tania Modleski identifies the rhythms of soap opera narrative with the rhythms of women viewers' lives, characterized by interruption, the difficulty of watching regularly, and so forth, in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (London: Methuen, 1982).

To explore and specify further the operations of the soap opera in these terms I will take a detour to review the nature of the relationship between viewers and soap opera, and to examine *Dallas* as a particular case study of the principles described above in practice. This will help concretize the ways in which institutional, textual and reception practices operate in the soap opera as mutually reinforcing spheres.

Soap opera audiences have been widely studied – both in the interests of consumer/marketing research and from the perspectives of a feminist cultural criticism seeking to identify the particular appeal of the genre for its women viewers and the varying ways in which these viewers use and interpret the programmes. The soap opera poses particularly acute concerns about the nature of mass culture and meaning, for both textual and audience studies, since the soap opera text is so large and unstable – indeed barely definable – while the television audience is itself immense and heterogeneous. In this context, neither textual functioning nor the stakes of viewership are easily described or contained. The complications are an effect of temporal duration: the longer the stories go on, the greater the possibilities, even the necessity, for change and transformation within a given programme.

Additionally, the conditions of soap opera production are widely known to the viewers and disseminated as an integral part of publicity and promotion. An extensive publicity apparatus alerts soap opera viewers when star contracts are expiring, announces when an actor decides to leave a show, and offers weekly summaries of plot developments, among other routine information. Changes in programme producers and writers are also addressed in the standard popular reporting. In the US, for example, weekly recaps of soap opera plots are published in daily papers and in *TV Guide*, as well as in magazines specifically devoted to the genre, such as *Soap Opera Digest*. There are also long-distance phone numbers with recordings providing summaries and highlights of forthcoming developments (including phone services for which callers may pay). As a result of such publicity, viewers are often keenly aware of the aesthetic and commercial demands of production.

This knowledge undermines transparency as a general principle of viewer–text relations. No matter how caught up viewers may be in a particular sequence of events, they simultaneously maintain critical awareness of the means of production. This is confirmed not only by the kinds of letters routinely printed in fan publications such as *Soap Opera Digest*, but also in ethnographically-based studies of soap audiences. As one study of working class viewers in Oregon argues:

Generally speaking, viewers have a strong sense of the constructedness of soap operas, of the essential artificiality of their

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favorite program. Not only did viewers frequently talk about and criticize the people who make soap operas (especially writers), they also commented on the conventions that rule and structure the shows. Their genre competence comes in many disguises. It was apparent in the complaint that writers cancel and replace characters too facily, in the sober assessment of the cycles soap opera plots go through in the course of a year relative to the ratings sweeps weeks, as well as in the often-reported practice of predicting future plot developments.⁸

And yet, as the authors of this study explain, 'The pleasure our viewers derive from their appreciation of the text's fictionality does not prevent them from getting personally involved in the text – and by extension, from experiencing soap operas as texts which are relevant to social reality.'⁹

⁸ Senter et al., "Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naive", p. 235

⁹ Ibid., p. 236

10 Ibid., pp. 233–4.

Part of the generic competency of viewers, which supports at once awareness of programme artificiality and involvement in the text's fictionality, is audience recognition that their own knowledge of and relation to the soap opera text is always partial. Many viewers purposely engage in selective viewing, concentrating their attention on particular subplots at the expense of others, as a way of negotiating the extensiveness of the textual system.¹⁰ This can lead to collaborative watching and reading, exchanging impressions and information with friends to fill in gaps in one's own comprehension. Self-consciousness about the partiality of one's own viewing naturalizes the integration of soap opera worlds into the everyday lives of viewers, as they discuss characters and events with friends as if they were 'real'. But it also indicates an awareness of the artificiality of the soap opera world itself, that can be approached selectively – often with the help of a VCR and a remote control – precisely because it is only a set of fictional stories.

Yet the partiality governing the viewer–text relation, discerned via ethnographic study of viewers, directly follows from the conventions of the soap opera text, as storylines undergo revision or reversals, and diegetic pasts can be recreated at will. That is to say, soap opera narratives are always implicitly partial from the outset. In the first place, multiple stories are simultaneously presented in pieces, interrupting one another, with ongoing shifts of focus. Second, and more crucially, there is always more waiting to be revealed that may change one's perspective on events. This is particularly acute when supposedly dead characters are revived. For example, when the very popular character of Laura (played by Genie Francis) was brought back to *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963–) for a visiting stint in the late 1980s, the programme included lengthy flashbacks to explain where she had been since her presumed death. Even longtime regular viewers had no access to the story prior to its presentation in flashback form. Within the fiction it was quite literally a case of history-in-the-making.

Partiality is just one way in which characteristic traits of the genre – especially those implicated in the contradictory construction of history and memory – are manifested in the formal aesthetics of soap opera narrative and the viewing habits of the audience, as well as anticipated (even promoted) by publicity and production processes. Partiality of knowledge is inscribed in the narrative structure itself, as an expectation of generic competence; it also plays a significant role in viewing habits:

Because of the vicissitudes of their personal circumstances, working careers, and everyday lives, even the most loyal fans are perfectly aware that at best they only have a very sketchy notion of the text in its totality.¹¹

More generally, the point is that viewers are self-consciously

11 Ibid., p. 233.

aware of the constructedness of soap operas as an integral part of the reception experience. This awareness is a result of a combination of factors including actual viewing habits, the aesthetic and formal conventions of the genre, and readily available information about ongoing circumstances of production. It is impossible, and theoretically counterproductive, to isolate and privilege one of these as the key to viewers' ability to watch soap operas with total engagement and critical distance, when it is precisely their interrelation which facilitates the contradictions that constitute the relations between television soap operas and their audience. This includes routine acceptance of sudden transformations and reversals in actors, characters and plots as a norm, even as these transformations rupture the internal consistency and verisimilitude that ground a realist reading and account for identification and textual absorption. This raises important questions about the stake of narrative and meaning for viewers in the face of the instability and uncertainty at the heart of the genre, including in the very terms of the viewer-text relation.

In the spring of 1986, in the very last scene of the final episode for the year on *Dallas* (Lorimar, 1978–91), Pam went into her bathroom on the morning after her marriage to Mark Graison, to be greeted by Bobby Ewing, her ex-husband, in the middle of a shower. On *Dallas*, Bobby had been fatally hit by a car the previous year (in the final episode of the 1984–5 season), with his death and burial seen at the start of the 1985–6 season. The shock of Pam's discovery of her deceased ex-husband, apparently just on the heels of her marriage to another man, was subsequently eased by the explanation that Bobby had never really died, and that his death as experienced by Pam – and everyone else on *Dallas* as well as millions of viewers – was just a dream. Crucially, this explanation was not offered until the primetime season opener in the subsequent autumn. Of course, the revival of deceased characters is commonplace in soap operas. But the case of Bobby Ewing in *Dallas* demonstrates a particularly extreme narrative turn. For it was not simply that Bobby had returned to the programme having never really died. Rather, along with Bobby's return, *none* of the events of the 1985–6 season retained the status of diegetic reality. In terms of the subsequent fiction, nothing dramatized during that year ever happened, even though programme viewers saw the whole thing.

Bobby's so-called revival, carefully anticipated in a massive publicity campaign, signalled the eradication of an entire season's worth of plots on *Dallas*. What viewers saw was relegated to the netherworld of an unspecified memory. For the events of the 1985–6 season persist even as they are denegated by Bobby's reappearance. They constitute an integral part of the programme *Dallas*, even if they are no longer part of its narrative continuity, ejected from the

diegetic reality of the programme. Thus, once integrally diegetic events are subjected to a process of redefinition. An initial, linear fictional history is retrospectively recast as Pam's dream, relocated from a public (hi)story to an individual dreamworld. In the face of this shift, viewers sustain the capacity to remember these events in terms of their initial, though now ahistorical, manifestation. The result is a less stable and less specifiable memory, particularly in the case of subplots from the so-called dream season that did not focus on Pam. Thus, their status becomes a 'memory effect', in an unstable balance between Pam's unconscious, the programme as a source of narration, and the personal memory of individual viewers. (This memory effect also carries the potential to infect another primetime soap, *Knot's Landing* (Lorimar, 1980–92), where one of the main characters is Gary Ewing, the brother of Bobby and J.R. Ewing from *Dallas*. Bobby's death motivated a number of significant events on *Knot's Landing* during the 1985–6 season; and the programme subsequently proceeded as if unaware that Bobby never really died.)

Here *Dallas* pushed the limits of narrative reversibility, in line with the pressures of ongoing seriality and the contingencies and demands of production typical of soap opera. Extensive publicity coverage preceding Patrick Duffy's departure paved the way for Bobby Ewing being killed off in the first place, establishing that the actor who portrayed him, Patrick Duffy, wanted to leave the show. Moreover, the publicity emphasized how much he wanted a definitive exit from the programme for Bobby, ensuring that no other actor could take over the role. In response to this publicity campaign, easing Duffy/Bobby out of the picture, his return required equivalent or even greater public airing.

The orchestration of Duffy's return to *Dallas* assumed two tacks, focusing on production circumstances and on the fictional context for his reappearance. In terms of production, emphasis was put on falling ratings during the 1985–6 season, and the increasing dissatisfaction of Larry Hagman (who portrayed J.R. Ewing, perhaps the key single character on the programme) with the plots developed during that year. Stories of Hagman's dissatisfaction culminated with producer Philip Capice's departure, the return of Leonard Katzman as executive producer, and the granting of more formal authority to Hagman on the production. With this new role, and with support from Katzman, Hagman personally approached Duffy to persuade him to come back to *Dallas*, with successful results. Meanwhile, another set of stories concentrated on how the programme was going to return Duffy in fictional terms: whether he would come back as Bobby, or someone else, and if the former, how that might be accomplished. Over and over again, media stories discuss the multiple possibilities and unknown solution to the mystery of Bobby's/Duffy's return. They also suggest that this

particular uncertainty is typical, noting that when it comes to characters coming and going on *Dallas*, there are a number of surprises in store for viewers.

In magazines, tabloids, newspapers, and television entertainment and talk shows, extensive attention was devoted to anticipating and evaluating these events. This included a *TV Guide* feature in which well-known authors, such as Judith Krantz, Stephen King, and Erich Segal, were asked to speculate on how the programme would resolve the cliffhanger, with Duffy/Bobby standing in the shower.

Speculation has been rampant, the favored theory suggesting that Bobby's tragic death last year was all just Pam's bad dream, from which she awakens only to discover Bobby blithely lathered in soap in her shower. Besides rendering the entire past season's episodes meaningless, what a cheat that approach would be for audiences.¹²

¹² Elaine Warren, 'Solving the mystery of Bobby's return to *Dallas*', *TV Guide*, 30 August, 1986, p. 4.

As things turned out, that is precisely what did happen, alternative theories – serious and otherwise – notwithstanding. Serving the needs of general publicity to regenerate interest in *Dallas* just a few weeks before the season premiere resolved the case, the article also proposes a certain pleasure in the very act of proliferating explanations, however speculative. 'Just to confuse things even more, we've asked some of our most inventive writers, many of them confirmed *Dallas* watchers, to suggest their own theories.'¹³

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

The wilful generation of multiple explanations is later mirrored in the expression of contradictory responses to the actual solution, which has already been defined as meaningless and a cheat for audiences. In October *TV Guide* published a 'Grapejeer' – their way of condemning practices on television:

To *Dallas*, for the all-too-perfunctory and anticlimactic manner in which it brought back Bobby Ewing (Patrick Duffy) on Sept. 26. We waited all summer for this? To say the least, it was a letdown to learn the explanation that all of last season was but a dream and that Bobby, in fact, never really died. Perhaps the resolution was convenient – but it also makes fans who loyally watched last season's episodes feel like chumps.¹⁴

¹⁴ 'Insider: grapejeer', *TV Guide*, 11 October, 1986, p. A-2.

However, the very next month in the context of the same column ('Cheers 'n jeers'), *TV Guide* celebrated Bobby's comeback as a positive renewal for the show:

Cheers. And an early vote for 'Comeback of the Year,' to CBS's *Dallas*. The return of Patrick Duffy has reinvigorated the storylines down at Southfork, bringing the Ewing clan – and their regular fussin' and feudin' – back to front-and-center. Heck, even J.R. is his own chuckling, mean self again, for which everyone (except maybe that nitwit Cliff Barnes) is just delighted, darlin'.¹⁵

¹⁵ 'Insider: cheers 'n jeers', *TV Guide*, 22 November, 1986, p. 30.

What is so striking about all of the material generated by Bobby's return is the way in which it creates multiple and contradictory meanings and opinions with an almost wilful vengeance. The publicity/information apparatus (of which *TV Guide* is only one example) reiterates, and even exacerbates, the instability created within the fiction by Bobby's 'return' (itself an inaccurate term since in the terms of the fiction, he never actually left). It affirms any opinion an individual reader or viewer might hold by proliferating explanations and reactions; at the same time it promotes participatory, even anticipatory, interpretation of the soap opera world as a norm.

Throughout the process of producing meanings which are unstable, contradictory, and reversible, no one controls the mechanism of meaning once and for all. In rewriting its own fictional history, soap opera inscribes history, narrative, and memory as spaces of production. On *Dallas* the plot developments during the season Bobby returned promote a forgetting of the previous season by offering alternative and present stories to supplant the earlier ones. Yet these new stories exist in the shadow of events as they were previously played out, and as they are variously remembered, by individual members of the audience. This includes certain repetitions in both production circumstances and plot developments which echo the previous season in other versions of dream logic that uncannily extend the very alibi for the new stories ('Pam's dream').

For example, just before Bobby Ewing's brief appearance in the shower at the end of the 1985–6 season, there was an explosion in the Ewing family offices, with a number of key characters known or assumed to be inside the building. At the end of the next season, in the spring of 1987, the programme concluded with a visually similar explosion, this time as Pam Ewing's car collided with a gas tanker. This explosion in fact condensed the final scenes of two previous seasons, combining the bomb explosion of spring 1986 with Bobby's fatal encounter with a car in the spring of 1985. Moreover, the 1987 collision, with Pam in the car was motivated by the well-publicized fact that Victoria Principal wanted to leave the show. The contingencies of production and plotting in the soap opera thus combine, over and over again, to yield uncanny repetitions as routine, rather than exceptional events in the life of the soap opera.

Like most soap operas, *Dallas* played with the idea of doubles, and characters returning from the dead on a regular basis. Rosalind Coward discusses this in 'Come back Miss Ellie'.¹⁶ Focusing on *Dallas*, she explores the convention of allowing different actors to portray the same character over time, and the apparent failure of this on *Dallas* when Donna Reed took over for Barbara Bel Geddes in her role as Miss Ellie, the family matriarch. Reed lasted only one season, and Bel Geddes, who had left the programme for health reasons, was brought back. Coward talks about the effort to contain

¹⁶ Rosalind Coward, 'Come back Miss Ellie: on character and narrative in soap operas', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 28, nos 1–2 (1986), pp. 171–8.

or cover over the problem of the 'double', as one character was embodied by two different actresses, by displacing it into the plot. In this case, as one narrative strand involved the introduction of an alleged Ewing cousin, Jamie Ewing (who proved to be legitimate). But this is hardly exceptional (either on *Dallas* or in soap operas more generally), contrary to the implications of Coward's argument. Rather, it is one example of a plot strategy that pervaded the show, including the appearance of a Jock Ewing impostor years after his death; the ambiguous return of Pam Ewing after her car accident at the end of the 1987 season left her disfigured, and in need of major plastic surgery; and the introduction of an unknown illegitimate son for J.R. during the last few years of the show. In other words, the whole question of doubles, impostors and replacements can be played out literally on the surface of the drama when different actors play the same role. But it is also continually thematized and rehearsed in narrative terms, in plots of impostors, doubles and unexpected returns and revivals. All of this is routine in US soap operas. Once again, production circumstances and fictional circumstances work with and against one another, as mutual alibis and supports, and as the displacement one for the other.

With the *Dallas* dream season, narrative history, dispensed with as a figment of a single character's imagination, is reinscribed as an amorphous imaginary that lurks within and alongside the subsequent events. This inscription includes the viewer as the repository of the amorphous imaginary (which is also a popular history). *Dallas*, and its dream season, thereby offer a particularly blatant and self-reflective version of a process of meaning production characteristic of soap opera. In some sense the programme as a narrational source lost control of its own diegetic history in the very attempt to rewrite history. By proposing a counterhistory of its own making, it left individual viewers free to recall, or not, the so-called dream season. But the more important point is that this is not peculiar to *Dallas*, but at the very heart of the soap opera genre more generally.

When it comes to US television soaps, which may go on for years, there is no single coherent linearity or teleology that organizes their historical trajectory. Historical narrative is construed as a saga with multiple parallel stories, some of which contradict and override others. The authorial source, impersonal as it is, absolutely determines the stories, but it does so in a context and a manner that preclude a singular, progressive historical vision. This is exacerbated by the proliferating ways in which these stories publicly circulate. Through an unstable and unpredictable array of network reruns, syndicated reruns, novelizations, coffee-table book production histories and the like, soap opera stories are available in different historical configurations at different times. For example, the earliest

stories of *General Hospital* or *Knots Landing* (among others) may be available in paperback books sold at the grocery store – tales of sexual intrigue and romantic adventure among characters who are no longer at the centre of the dramas as they currently appear on television. The recirculation of these stories may remind longstanding viewers of their early attachments and inflect present viewing and understanding of character relations. All of this production, outside the bounds of television but intimately tied to the soap operas on air, proliferates the range of information to which individual viewers have access, encouraging them to configure their own relations to programmes in personal terms that cannot be delimited or controlled by producers or writers.

This is exacerbated within the programmes when aesthetic and narrative strategies seem inconsonant with the nature of particular ongoing historical developments. In one case on *General Hospital*, a protracted story involved one character's Mexican heritage, international smugglers of Mexican national treasures, and a CIA-like spy organization. After months of intrigue that took the characters to Texas and Mexico, the spy/smuggling story was resolved, with villains captured, one apparent villain revealed as an undercover spy (thus transformed into a 'good guy' who ended up continuing as a regular character on the show), Felicia's royal heritage confirmed, and her family treasures restored to a museum in Mexico as part of their national heritage. Felicia then told her partner-in-adventure, Frisco Jones, that she did not plan to return with him to Port Charles, the central fictional setting for the programme.

Over the course of two episodes, in a number of lengthy scenes, Felicia was shown walking around in the Texas countryside, with a constant soundtrack of emotional music. Through excessive formal means – the use of music, the very duration of the scenes – the programme seemed to signal the definitive end for a major narrative trajectory, including the expected departure of one of its main characters. The formal signs of closure were nearly unprecedented in the context of daytime serial melodrama. Yet the character in question did not end up leaving the show after all, but soon returned to Port Charles maintaining her role as an ongoing character. This is just one example of the difficulty soap operas seem to have when it comes to providing aesthetic cues or formal patterns that are consonant with a sense of control over a larger series' historical vision. For none of the formal signs of closure deployed in this instance had anything to do with an ending either for Felicia in the programme, or for the developing relationship with Frisco (whom she married years later).

The same thing can be seen in *Dallas*, in perhaps more extreme terms. For *Dallas* did in fact finally end in the spring of 1991, with a special two-hour episode. For this longstanding, successful

primetime drama, the producers had sufficient notice to provide some form of closure. Yet on the heels of so many years of stories, with characters coming and going, along with the reversals and repetitions typical of soap operas, including the dream season, the idea of simply wrapping up the then current plots in progress was not the producers' solution to how to end things. Instead the final episode was a parody of the popular film *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). As it opens, family patriarch and arch-manipulator J.R. Ewing is experiencing profound depression. He holds a gun and contemplates suicide when the Devil appears in his room, to show him what life in Dallas would have been like if he had never been born. The subsequent film is a hodgepodge of characters and stories from *Dallas*'s past. It is limited from the outset in having to restrict its own imagination to the actors/characters who were willing and able to participate in the production. In the conceptual context of the programme's larger fictional history, this involves some glaring omissions, such as the Ewing family patriarch Jock Ewing, who is absent because the actor who portrayed him died several years before the series ended.

In this case, the absence of a vision that would secure conventional historical narrative continuity combined with (obvious) conditions and constraints of production to lead to an 'alternative' vision that did not – indeed could not – offer a systematically reworked vision of life in Dallas without J.R. Ewing. In a fundamental sense, because the soap opera as narrational source does not control programme history (even as it creates the story), it is impossible to rewrite the past. Or, since the soap opera is always engaged in a process of ongoing rewriting, it is not possible for one particular rewrite to engage history in an exceptional way.

The textual production of history in US soaps, and the textual-institutional networks that engage audiences, produce what might best be described as memory without nostalgia.¹⁷ The ongoing accumulation of events, referencing the lives of viewers, is crucial but always reversible even, as in the case of *Dallas*, to the point of disavowing the narrative events of a whole season. Viewers remember characters and events from the past, but also have to accept changes in the way familiar characters and events are situated. This is striking in the context of soap operas because of the singularly proximate and sentimental investments conventionally posited between the genre and its viewers.¹⁸ Given the ways in which female viewer attachments to mass culture in general, and melodrama in particular, have been theorized, one more readily imagines an audience for soap opera that would be far more unhappy with, and even resistant to, the routine ease with which the genre dispenses with its own historical continuities and consistencies, in fictional and representational terms.

With this perspective, the crew member who interrupted

17 The phrase is adapted, with apologies, from Arjun Appadurai who refers in a different context to 'nostalgia without memory', in 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', *Public Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1990), pp. 1–24.

18 For discussions of women's relations to mass culture see Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*; Tania Modleski, 'Femininity as mas(s)querade: a feminist approach to mass culture', in Colin McCabe (ed.), *High Theory/Low Culture* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 37–52; Lynne Joyrich, 'All that television allows: TV melodrama, postmodernism, and consumer culture', *Camera Obscura*, no. 16 (1988), pp. 129–53; Joyrich, 'Critical and textual hypermasculinity', in Patricia Mellencamp (ed.), *Logics of Television* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 156–72; and Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

19 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Part I: 'The horror of incest', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition*, vol. 13 (London: Hogarth Press, 1959); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969); and Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vols. II and III, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), especially Part 2, 'The prohibition of incest', pp. 27–58.

production in the anecdote related at the start of this essay emerges as an unstable, yet typical, figure for the soap opera audience. On the one hand he speaks (if indeed he spoke at all) in order to enforce one of the founding laws of patriarchy, the incest taboo.¹⁹ His intervention demonstrates a memory of the programme's fictional history, a position of knowledge conventionally identified with female viewers. At the same time his interruption suggests a more general lack of familiarity with the genre: as discussed earlier, the threat of incest embodied in adult romance is a sufficiently well-known plot complication in soap opera that a knowledgeable viewer would not be shocked. The technician's place condenses contradictory positions, including masculinity and femininity, involvement and distance, knowledge and ignorance, culminating in a verbal outburst expressing a combination of knowledge and horror with respect to the impending (f)act of incest.

The very nature of soap opera narrative structure enables, even facilitates, the proliferation of what I am calling the romantic incest plot. This term differentiates the complications to adult romance caused by the revelation of previously unknown filiation from the exploration of incest as a 'social problem' when older adults take young children as targets of sexual involvement. In the most common versions of the romantic incest plot, mutual adult romantic attachments are unhappily interrupted by revelations of shared parentage. Adult characters who become connected in this way initially do not realize they are related because they lack knowledge about their own lineage. With the genre's narrative emphasis on domestic and interpersonal situations, filial relations that are often uncertain to begin with are reconstructed over time, redefining the nature of all character interrelations in the process.

In a symbolic register, the romantic incest plot, grounded in historiographic instability, functions as a disruption or critique of patriarchal domination and as an enactment of the liberating fantasy potential of family romance. The very possibility of the romantic incest plot requires duplicity or ignorance about one's proper parentage, exposing the weak links of patriarchy. For if one cannot know for certain who one's father is in particular, the hold of the patronymic and of patriarchal authority is undermined. At the same time, clarification of proper familial relations, once thrown into question, requires extensive investigation and narrative elaboration. The traditional nuclear family thus remains a point of reference, even as it displays its inadequacies or limits in practice. In this way the romantic incest plot can function as a symbolic challenge to patriarchal domination. Selective memory and partial knowledge – of viewers and of characters in the fiction – thereby serves as a strategic device, provoking narrative investigation of familial instability. Because of this, the romantic incest plot, for all its instability, can also be construed as an obsessive preoccupation with

²⁰ This is more in line with the position offered by Laura Mumford, 'Plotting paternity: looking for dad on the daytime soaps', *Genders*, no. 12 (1991), pp. 45–61.

²¹ Key literature in this area includes Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980); Diana E. H. Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Judith Lewis Herman with Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); and Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

²² Mumford, 'Plotting paternity'.

anchoring patriarchy. The resolution of paternity (or maternity, as the case may be) restores characters to their 'proper place' in the familial order.²⁰ Of course, even when a character's proper parentage is established, the very logic of soap opera narratives sustains a margin of uncertainty for the future, in which the resolution can again be thrown into question. In other words, the incest plot can be seen as transgressive and destabilizing, or as recuperative and conservative, depending on whether one emphasizes the 'middles' or the 'ends' of the stories (which are only parts of larger serial dramatic structures).

At the same time, to complicate matters further, the very commonality of the incest plot, even its ongoing possibility, resonates with recent research on, and documentation of, incest in everyday life (at least in the US), where children, especially females, are victims of unwanted sexual assault by adult male relatives.²¹ In this 'sociological' context the romantic incest plot offers a displaced exploration and exposition of repressed social-sexual relations within the nuclear family, ones that most frequently function with profound and longterm effects on the (predominantly female) survivors. Soap opera is one place in mass culture where this issue has been narratively addressed with some regularity, albeit in a disguised or a displaced manner. The most conventional version of the romantic incest plot construes its participants as willing, if unwitting, partners in a relationship which elsewhere (for example, in the individual experience of some soap opera viewers) is undergirded by relations of power, privilege and domination in patriarchy. (Complications of filial identity can also lead to investigation of class, ethnic, and financial issues, which are equally related to questions of power and patriarchal authority.²²) The genre thereby raises the spectre of individual histories, many of which are themselves subject to selective memory, as they are repressed by the survivors of incest.

Soap opera's romantic incest plot – based in the reversible and revisable historical trajectories of the genre – combines symbolic and sociologically grounded meanings about incest and the family. It is a plot complication that is overdetermined in its occurrences and in the interpretive possibilities it unleashes. The very fact of dramatizing incest enables the recognition of soap opera as a genre that mythically negotiates the social fact of incest. But the most common manifestation of incest, transformed into mutually consenting adult romance relations, also functions as a structural apology and alibi, as an accidental byproduct of a relationship otherwise represented as fulfilling the positivity of heterosexual romance. (This is distinct from the genre's more recent engagement with incest in terms of a 'social problem'.)

Thus in the course of the soap opera, the narrative and viewing strategies most strongly associated with the genre's historiography – the concentration on interpersonal relationships, partiality,

redundancy and reversibility – combine to provoke multiple and contradictory meanings focused on issues with particular symbolic and experiential weight for individual viewers and for patriarchal culture more generally. The deployment of the melodramatic historical imagination via television soap opera generates uncertainties and instabilities, both in the development of narrative and in the possibilities for meaning thereby provoked. This occurs in a context where attention is focused primarily on the family, on networks of filial and community/work relations, and on the position of individuals within these social structures. With these interests the soap opera can speak to viewers in different ways, incorporating selective individual memory and self-consciousness as strategies for interpreting narrative complications as they are endlessly narratively rehearsed.

Christine Gledhill suggests something along the same lines when she argues that the schematic plotting of melodrama constructs ‘improbable interpersonal conjunctures, permits emotional enactments within fantasies disallowed by social or cultural convention, which can then be worked over according to the processes of women’s fictional forms as if they are real’.²³ The romantic incest plot clearly follows from this understanding of melodrama in relation to soap opera, exploring the incest taboo and the social fact of incest in condensed and unlikely interpersonal conjunctures. In this context, the soap opera works through the tensions and contradictions of incest as a material force in women’s lives, whether it derives its potency in symbolic or experiential terms. This is all the more acute in light of increasing debate focused on incest memories. This emerges in theoretical terms in relation to renewed considerations about Freud’s seduction theory,²⁴ and is repeated and extended in practice, as the status and impact of children’s reports of incest and of adult memories of incest are widely contested in newspapers and popular magazines, and played out in popular fictions and nonfictions in a variety of media. The ambiguous nature and status of incest as it is enacted in the romantic incest plot on soap operas prefigures, and continually reenacts, this instability. In this light, the technician of my opening anecdote may have just been trying to keep the lid on one Pandora’s box.²⁵

²³ Gledhill, ‘Speculations on the relationship between soap opera and melodrama’, p. 121.

²⁴ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Penguin, 1984); Janet Malcolm, *In the Freud Archives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

²⁵ Laura Mulvey explores Pandora as a figure of female curiosity in ‘Pandora: topographies of the mask and curiosity’, in Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 53–72. In a related vein, Michelle Citron uses the figure of Pandora (translatable as all Doras) as a means of interrogating incest, memory and narrative in ‘Speaking the unspeakable: how we talk when words fail’, Van Zelst Professor of Communications lecture, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 1992.

Skirting the issue

RENEE BAERT

- 1 Sigmund Freud, 'On the genesis of fetishism', in Louis Rose, 'Freud and fetishism: previously unpublished minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, vol. 57 no. 1 (1988), pp. 147–60. Cited in Lorraine Gamman and Merja Mäkinen, *Female Fetishism: a New Look* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), p. 41.
- 2 Freud's standing formulation has been contradicted by other accounts that report on fetishism in case studies of women. For a recent discussion linking the acknowledgement of female fetishism to the need for new psychoanalytic models of the female erotic, see Gamman and Mäkinen, *Female Fetishism*; Anne McClintock, 'The return of female fetishism and the fiction of the phallus', *New Formations*, no. 19 (1993), pp. 1–21.
- 3 Freud, 'On the genesis of fetishism', p. 41.

In one of his earliest papers on fetishism, 'On the genesis of fetishism' (1909), Freud turns from an account centred on male case studies to direct a glancing attention towards women. 'Half of humanity must be classed among the clothes fetishists', he avers. 'All women, that is, are clothes fetishists.' This is, to be sure, a passive form of the scopophilic drive, a desire to be looked at (by men), 'which is repressed by the clothes, and on account of which clothes are raised to a fetish'.¹

Of particular concern to Freud in this working paper is the splitting process wherein one aspect of the object is repressed and another idealized. This nominal assignment of a second order fetishism to women is later rescinded altogether by Freud's specification of fetishism as an exclusively masculine perversion by dint of its relation to castration anxiety.² If the threat posed by the discovery of the mother's phallic lack is the predicate of the boy's entry into 'normal' sexuality, fetishism represents a compromise formation through which maternal castration is at once recognized and disavowed via the fetish as stand-in for the missing maternal phallus.

Yet Freud's offhand comments on women's unisexually universal narcissistic and exhibitionistic tendencies, with their correlate of women's thrall to fashion (even to clothes which 'do not show them to their best advantage')³ might be qualified by a point raised by a number of historians in different fields, whose accounts suggest Freud is very much of his culture in conflating the expression of a cultural system with a gendered symptom. The association of women as a sex with vanity, narcissism and exhibitionism, manifest in a particular preoccupation with display and self-adornment is,

according to these accounts, of a historically recent order. It is principally since the rise of the Industrial Revolution that women in western culture have been delegated prime purchase on the realm of sartorial extravagance and bodily exhibitionism which, in tribal and other nonwestern cultures, as well as in the privileged classes of the West until that time, had been the pleasure of men and women alike – for the aristocratic male often spectacularly so.

In his turn-of-the-century account of the consumerist devotions of the emergent leisure class of early western capitalist culture, Thorstein Veblen famously describes the modes of pecuniary taste as Conspicuous Consumption, Conspicuous Leisure and Conspicuous Waste – to which Quentin Bell later adds the category of Conspicuous Outrage.⁴ Veblen's emphasis on the articulation of new class values foregrounds women's role as vicarious stand-ins for men's consuming passions. The conspicuous display of finery by women of the rising bourgeois class served as an advertisement of their husband's (or father's) prosperity, the unwieldiness of the increasingly pumped up and elaborate clothing itself a sign of the freedom of women of this leisure class from the physical requirements even of household labour.

In *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930), J. C. Flügel also directed particular attention to a new accentuation of sex difference in clothing in the late eighteenth century, but with an emphasis on its psychic dimensions. 'At about that time there occurred one of the most remarkable events in the whole history of dress', he announces – an event he terms The Great Masculine Renunciation.⁵ This development is men's relinquishment of luxe and ostentation in dress, together with the inhibition, displacement or sublimation of their sartorial desires. The simplicity of the austere tailored garments adopted by men of the rising bourgeois class was the visible expression of the virtues of industry, self-control and renunciation they advanced; while the greater uniformity of the clothing 'suited' the new ideals of brotherhood and fraternity which followed the French Revolution. 'How have men been able to bear the sacrifice that the new order has imposed on them?', Flügel asks. 'What has happened to the psychological tendencies (Narcissistic, exhibitionistic, etc.) which formerly found expression in the decorative aspects of their dress?'⁶ In answer, he outlines the compensatory solutions available to men for this great loss: the sublimation into work, the conversion of exhibitionism to scopophilia (or the general desire to see and know), vicarious exhibitionism (projective identification with the bedecked and jewelled female) and transvestism.

Kaja Silverman has remarked upon the potential for feminist research of Flügel's analysis of this masculine loss and its compensations, drawing from his account its implication that scopophilia, over and above its critical interest as a masculine

4 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York and London: Allen & Unwin, 1970, originally Macmillan, 1899); Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947).

5 J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institution of Psycho-analysis, 1930), pp. 110–21.

6 Ibid., p. 115.

7 Kaja Silverman, 'Fragments of a fashionable discourse', in Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 141.

8 Ted Polhemus, 'The clothing of culture', in *Conceptual Clothing* (exhibition catalogue, Ikon Gallery, 1986), p. 8.

9 Karen Hanson, 'Dressing down dressing up', in Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (eds), *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 234. Citation is from Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 32.

defence against castration anxiety, 'may betray desires that are incompatible with the phallic function – that it may attest to a shared psychic space over and against which sexual difference is constructed'.⁷ She further notes that men's identification with woman-as-spectacle offers promising implications for the destabilization of gender.

The anthropologist Ted Polhemus has likewise attributed men's 'corporal striptease' to the rationalist ethic of the Industrial Revolution:

Western society entered the age of 'The Invisible Man' while women, because the need for bodily expression is not a thing which human beings can readily eradicate from their natures, were conscripted to serve as surrogate bodies for their men folk.⁸

This splitting and displacement is also thoroughly codified in the gendered mind/body, substance/surface divides of philosophy. As Karen Hanson has observed, 'the bulging closet and the cluttered makeup table seem to instantiate . . . "the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-a-brac" that the sublime soul would prefer to ignore. And philosophers do tend to cast their lots with the sublime soul and its superior interests.'⁹

The repression of men's expressive narcissism – itself a displacement of the bodily narcissism of the child onto a cultural form – and its further displacement onto women provides a recognizable working system for the unequal gender operations whereby women, culturally assigned a weighted role of dressing up, are then subject to dressing down for their frivolity, superficiality and vanity.

As the tissue that separates the self and the social, clothing is a semiotically dense and complex social form. But the realm of bodily decoration, clothing and display in western culture carries the freight of its social coding as feminine. The critical intervention by women into these codes thus operates against a doubled set of inscriptions (the figure of Woman, the ground of the feminine). Yet feminist thinking has its own internal divisions on the question of feminine narcissism and self-decoration, within which clothing as signifier is differentially mobilized in a range of registers from reform and critique to play and fantasy.

Elizabeth Wilson has proposed that feminism is riven by an unresolved tension between two mutually inconsistent cultural models, the 'authentic' and the 'modernist', each of which finds expression in the issue of fashion and clothing. The model of the 'authentic' is bound up in ideas of the natural and committed to the expression of identity and the 'true' self; it is condemnatory of consumerism, the artifice of fashion and the oppressiveness of beauty culture. As exemplars of the 'authentic' model, she cites the dress reform movement of the nineteenth century and the

10 Elizabeth Wilson, 'Feminism and fashion', in *Adorned in Dreams* (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 228-47.

11 Hanson, 'Dressing down dressing up', p. 235.

12 Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton, *Women and Fashion: a New Look* (New York and London: Quartet Books, 1989), p. 143. The quotation is from a discussion of the work of designer Elsa Schiaparelli.

13 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975).

modern-day hippie. Conversely, the 'modernist' cultural model privileges dissimulation, fluidity of codes and subversive play with the signifier. Thus the nineteenth-century dandy and contemporary punk are prototypically 'modernist'.¹⁰ Indeed, by extension, the 'modernist' position would challenge the idea that there is such a thing as a 'natural' form of clothing – or indeed any cultural manifestation – against which to measure 'artifice'. Wilson comes down on the side of the 'modernist' paradigm which, unlike what she terms the 'cult of the authentic', allows for the ambivalence of fantasy and the 'contradictory and irreconcilable desires' that are part and parcel of subjectivity.

The early nineteenth century is a cultural moment within which the importance of clothing as a signifier of class and profession or trade is superseded by its assimilation to the intensive marking of sexual difference. As 'The Invisible Man' loses access to his body, it is the female body and its decorative accoutrements that come to stand in for this loss, and she is bound more tightly to biology, body and the 'private' domains of domesticity and sexuality, even as she is mythologized, allegorized and demonized as Woman. Yet as Karen Hanson points out, the threat to women's identity 'posed by the gaze that turns its own limitation into the other's liability'¹¹ cannot be adequately met through a comparable renunciation of the realm of the feminine. Insofar as the nineteenth century bequeathed the realm of adornment and display to women, but within a sexual divide that assigns this 'shared psychic space' to the feminine/negative sign, this would seem to leave women who would challenge patriarchal relations with the problem of just what to do with this tainted, yet insistently pleasurable, gift.

Yet if clothing forms a crucial part of the construction of the feminine within a patriarchal order of meaning, clothing also offers women a means by which to subvert and transform these meanings. Whereas Freud's description of women's clothing 'fetishism' emphasized the passive form of the scopic drive, and the 'displacement' theses similarly imply feminine passivity and complicity, it is as *active* subjects of vision and of dress that women can differently articulate issues of gendered embodiment. The vehicle of clothing offers a partial means by which the woman may, as it were, '*play* her way out of her predicament, the impasse of femininity'.¹²

Feminist film criticism has been an important arena for discussing how the female figure appears in the cinematic image as lure, fetish, spectacle and object of imaginary possession in a relay of looks that does not include her own. She is, in the now classic term, the to-be-looked-at,¹³ and what is most particularly on view is her clothing: it is a primary means through which her sexuality is symbolized. Cinema and clothing converge as analogous representational systems

composing the feminine image. As Jane Gaines observes,

just as conventional cinematic representation would seem to dissolve without a trace, leaving the distillation 'woman', costume delivers gender as self-evident or natural and then recedes as 'clothing', leaving the connotation 'femininity'.¹⁴

In Laura Mulvey's famous account of the operations of classical cinema, these serve to resecure the imaginary stability of the masculine spectatorial subject against the spectre of castration represented by the female body via the mastering voyeuristic look or fetishistic defences.¹⁵ From this inaugural analysis have arisen important questions and debate about the identificatory position available to the female spectator within this circuit of looks. To date, however, the object of critical attention has been overwhelmingly mainstream, usually Hollywood, cinema. Mary Ann Doane summed up, some time ago, the basic problem confronting the female spectator of this cinema: 'There are no images either *for* her or *of* her'¹⁶, a situation scarcely since improved.

In the early 1970s, a proliferation of feminist film festivals brought a neglected heritage of women's film into wider view, and these events gave inspiration and impetus to a new generation of women filmmakers intent on building upon this legacy. In the ensuing years, as women have stepped behind the cameras in ever greater numbers, so too the depth and breadth of the feminist movement has constituted a 'critical mass' of audience well positioned to recognize and receive these images *for* and *of* her. Yet the feminist filmmaker, working against the dominant cultural codes by which the borders of gender are mapped, must inevitably confront the problem, as Gaines puts it, of 'that impossible body carrying the layers of sexual connotation she cannot remove'.¹⁷

The work of Anne Hollander suggests, however, that in western culture 'that impossible body' cannot, to all intents and purposes, be distinguished from its clothed representative. In *Seeing Through Clothes*, a monumental account of the centuries-long dialogue between the domains of art, fashion and clothing, Hollander argues that, even as representational art depicts clothing, so visual conventions in any given period shape and determine our perception of the dressed and undressed body: our 'visual self-awareness' is itself purchased through these representational codes.¹⁸ Hollander distinguishes the western culture of clothing from the 'abstract' clothing of ethnic dress, folk costume and so forth, forms which reduce the wearer to an interchangeable, often depersonalized, 'symbol-bearing abstraction'. In western culture, with its long history of figurative art, the function of clothing is 'to contribute to the making of a self-conscious individual image, an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualizations of the human body'.¹⁹

It is this property of clothing in western culture – not a stable

14 Jane Gaines, 'Fabricating the female body', in Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (eds), *Fabrications* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 1.

15 Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'.

16 Mary Ann Doane, 'Woman's stake', in *Femmes Fatales* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 166.

17 Gaines, 'Fabricating the female body', p. 7.

18 Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), p. xii.

19 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

symbol but a circulating sign – that enables not only the cyclical overturnings of fashion and of what constitutes the look ‘natural’ to a given period of culture, but also sponsors the potential for subversive play with the clothing signifier. Clothing, never natural, inescapably cultural, partakes of preexistent sets of meanings and conventions. As a social form, its ‘readability’, whether as fashion or critique, is dependent upon certain forms of social consensus which construct that reading. In this sense, feminism itself provides a viable social ground upon which alternative readings can be elaborated. The mobility of signification, its potential for recoding from within these social processes, has important implications for the destabilization of dominant codes of gender which, though embedded in relations of power, have no guarantee.

Yet if dress is a social form, as surrogate for the body it also partakes of the body’s relation to psyche and desire. Clothing is a compound medium and critical axis of the social (law), the sexual (fantasy), the figural (representation) and the individual (will and desire). If there is no skirting the issue presented by ‘that impossible body carrying the layers of sexual connotation she cannot remove’, one response to this dilemma may be precisely in ‘skirting’ the issue, in subverting gender conventions through clothing itself, thus effecting a disturbance within the (claims to) normativity of the dominant and proffering alternative representations of modalities of being and desire.

Streetwear in contemporary culture has itself been an important vehicle for precisely such operations, and the field of cultural studies has taken particular notice of semiotic battles against dominant culture played out in subcultures through the sign of clothing. The zoot suit, punk wear, the gay ‘clone’ look and gender crossdressing are ‘modernist’ rather than ‘authentic’ articulations of the self, which put into play the ‘shifting relations between being and appearance, seeing and being seen’.²⁰ In their discussion of women in punk, for example, Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton have described how, despite the patriarchal structure of punk subculture, punk women were able to claim their own critical space through the use of oppositional dress. As a street style, their clothes borrowed from the clichés of prostitute street wear and from the private closet of the fetishist. Punk wear separated these signifiers from their signifieds, redirecting and diverting meaning. As the authors note, ‘when punk women appropriate the bad girl *look*, the separation of the look from its signified, sexual availability, constituted a form of deviance in itself. This was a refusal to submit to the pressure on women to be what they appeared.’²¹ As a street style, women’s punk mangled sexual codes, confounded given meanings, valorized ‘bad taste’, advocated an unpretty look of menace and threat and generally ‘pinpointed the masquerade of femininity, the unholy alliance of femininity, naturalness, good taste and good behaviour’.²²

²⁰ Evans and Thornton, *Women and Fashion*, p. 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Yet streetwear is necessarily constrained as a vehicle for the symbolic recoding of meaning by its function as dress (and with that, as with punk, its potential for commercial recuperation). By contrast, art and the field of visual representation can, through the framing devices particular to each medium, insert or isolate clothing within other discursive settings which, in emphasizing 'meaning' over 'being', produce different effects. This reframing is most apparent in the visual arts, where clothing – unlike in streetwear, performance, theatre, film – may be altogether divorced from the body as bearer: the disembodied garment retains its connotative dimensions, linked to sexuality and gendered bodies, yet without the literalness, or voyeuristic entrapments, of the figured body. In this way, it functions not as dress or costume *per se* but as a culturally coded sign, assimilable to other symbolic operations. Among better known instances of the use of clothing in this expanded frame are the glass museum cases in several works by Annette Messager that entomb to uncanny effect empty childhood dresses; or the images of isolated (fetishized) articles of women's clothing (shoes, dress, leather jacket, handbag, nightgown) that appear within the *Corpus* section of Mary Kelly's *Interim*, where, in substituting for the female body, they underscore that the referent is the imaginary rather than the biological body.

Within film, costume, naturalized as clothing, has a necessary denotative dimension. But clothing as a constituent element of narrative also has the potential to be surcharged beyond this utilitarian function – as indeed is the case in the fetishized spectacle of the feminine. In her analysis of the role of costume in women filmmaker's reclamation of the past through historical drama, Stella Bruzzi has drawn attention to two distinct registers of clothing. Bruzzi distinguishes between the 'liberal' and the 'sexual' models of historical reclamation and points to the role of costume within these. The liberal model is concerned to draw political and ideological links and affinities between women's lives in the past and the present: these films employ clothing as 'merely signifiers to carry information about country, class and period'. The sexual model, by contrast, seeks to illuminate the more hidden emotive and sexual elements of past women's lives. These films, of which *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) is the point of instance in her discussion, 'imbue the clothes themselves with sensuality, so they become essential components of the sexual dialogue'.²³

In the discussion which follows, I would like to draw attention to a further approach to costume in women's film, one which also shifts the denotative dimensions of feminine dress into a second register, doubled over the first. In this move, the double coding establishes two interacting positions, feminine and feminist, enabling a symbolic reinscription of the feminine in feminist terms. This reinscription is not an abjuring of the feminine but a repositioning of it within the

²³ Stella Bruzzi, 'Jane Campion: costume drama and reclaiming women's past', in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds), *Women and Film: a Sight and Sound Reader* (London: Scarlett Press, 1993), pp. 233–4.

stakes of desire. In the three examples that follow, this double register is achieved through stylistic, narrative or structural devices proper to the time-based medium itself rather than directly through the clothes *per se*, as in oppositional, subcultural style. Each of the films, in ways particular to each, utilizes clothing that is already coded within the feminine; yet simultaneously performs, through the framing devices of film, operations of denaturalization which serve to resituate this signification.

The effectivity of this manoeuvre lies in the first instance in its destabilization of the conventions of cinematic practice through which the figure of the woman is conventionally proffered. But this approach has something more to contribute to debates on the representation of 'that impossible body' through its further destabilization of key critical concepts by which the representation of the figure of the woman is conventionally contained. That is, whereas psychoanalysis has provided an indispensable tool for analyzing the chronic reiteration of patriarchal relations within classical film, the categories of analysis it advances are less than fully useful when applied to films by women wherein the image of woman invites relations of spectatorship not founded on the pleasure and predicament of the masculine spectator.

This grouping of films extends across three generations of film practice and three entirely different modes of production. The short film, *So Where's My Prince, Already?* (1976), is directed by Ardele Lister as a modern day fable that, in a realist style that plays havoc with the conventions of 'on the spot' reportage, recasts the fairy tale romance by picking up on the story after the arrival of the prince. She employs clothing as metaphor through a strategy of parodistic estrangement that operates on the highly-charged feminine signifier of the wedding dress. Chantal Akerman's feature-length *Toute une nuit/All Night Long* (1982) reworks the genre of melodrama through a hybridization of narrative and structuralist modes. Here clothing is employed in both the liberal sense advanced by Bruzzi as support to the narrative function, and in the sexual sense, as part of the film's sensuality; but these are subordinated to a formal filmic language which displaces and disperses these effects. In *Gerda* (1992), Brenda Longfellow employs a hybrid overcharged realist style, mixing fiction, historical document and faux-documentary. In this short feature film, clothing is highlighted as iconography in a distanced depiction of feminine masquerade.

'There are not many funny feminist films about', Charlotte Brunsdon has noted.²⁴ Certainly an exception is this early (and only) short film by video artist Ardele Lister. In *So Where's My Prince, Already?* Lister plays straightface within naturalistic cinematic conventions, enlisting the tools of parody, excess, fantasy and irony in her depiction, at the new dawn of the women's liberation

24 Charlotte Brunsdon (ed.), *Films for Women* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), p. 4.

movement, of a distinctly unliberated bride. A wedding gown is the central motif of the film – one might almost say a principal member of the cast.

The story opens with the happy bride about to embark on the adventure of marriage. 'A lot of people are putting marriage down these days', she gushes, 'but when you really love someone and are committed to the relationship, it's an easy thing to do . . .'. The film is a chronicle of too-predictable setbacks to her idealized plans: her own career dreams diverted to working to support her husband's studies; plans to travel come the elusive date of his graduation indefinitely postponed by pregnancy, and so on. These updates on the progress of the heroine's life are conveyed in a friendly, confiding address to the viewer, as she persists, with earnest naivete and against all odds, in her deluded vision of potential bliss.

The bridal dress is the emblem of her romantic ideals and so, just as she is clothed in dreams, so she remains forever adorned in the gown that represents them. The dress, with a small red heart emblazoned on the chest, is variously her apron, her workclothes, her 'good' dress, her maternity wear, her jogging suit, her nightgown. Dressed in the unwieldy outfit, battling with the train of her veil, the perpetual bride scrubs the toilet, feeds the baby, struggles with groceries, finds herself working two outside jobs, is the kitchen-bound hostess to academic dinner parties, jogs along the beachwalk pushing the baby stroller, and so on. With the focus on the bride, the husband is given short shrift: a lump in the bed, a body behind the newspaper, a voice in the background ('Don't haaaasssle me!'). The camera is rather like a visitor who has unexpectedly turned up and to whom, hospitably, she relays her confidences, asides and non sequiturs. A female voiceover from time to time offers a commentary, with a corresponding image of the words printed on a valentine. ('Just because she hadn't come, she thought she couldn't be a Mom'.) As the film proceeds, the dress becomes more and more bedraggled; in one scene, the heroine gazes long and wistfully at a storefront window display of bright new bridal gowns. By the end of the film, she has rings around her darting eyes, is tipling booze from a baby bottle, has surrendered her sexuality to a vibrator, and has gone quite mad. As the camera leaves her for the last time, she is feverishly fantasizing a holiday in South America.

Rather like Oscar Wilde's tale of Dorian Gray, wherein a painting of Gray records in minute detail the effects of his journey into decadence and evil even as his own visage retains the angelic beauty of his youth, so in this comic feminist fable the wedding dress bears mute testimony to the realities its ever-optimistic owner avoids. But here, rather than the wedding dress recording the corrosion of soul of its owner, the bride, it presents a satirically corrosive picture of a deception at the heart of the promise represented by the dress itself.



The eternal bride descends into madness. So *Where's My Prince Already?* (Ardele Lister, 1976)

25 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958)

The wedding dress is of course a particularly potent symbol of the feminine, one not easily dislodged: for it is the nexus of a cluster of meanings, centred most obviously on the wedding itself as the triumphant apex of romantic love, on the girl's entry into womanliness, on the bride's accession to the 'culture' of marriage, 'a whole way of life'.²⁵ In the film, the wedding gown symbolizes for the bride the promise of her 'happy ending', which is, as it turns out, the unhappy beginning of her role of caretaker to everyone but herself. It is this sacrificial logic governing women's place in traditional marriage – the wife's identity subsumed in that of 'my husband and I' – that the film derides. The wedding dress is the relay point in the film's absurdist prising apart of symbol and real: even as the bride holds tenaciously onto this symbol of plenitude, the film reveals its hollowness – an empty dress, plumped up by illusions.



Director, cast and crew of *So Where's My Prince Already?*

In *So Where's My Prince, Already?*, just as the wedding day extends into marriage, so the film is an improbable but 'logical' extension of its symbolic representative, the wedding dress, from its wear on 'that special day' into the everyday. Through her hyperbolically feminine bride, clothed in the fabric of patriarchy, Lister takes on the potent symbol of the wedding dress and, through the syntax of the film, literally wears it out.

Toute une nuit is orchestrated in three movements, the prelude of evening, the fullness of night and the denouement of early morning. Night here offers the suspension of the preoccupations and pace of the everyday and into this interregnum surges the emotional part of existence. 'The night is more unreal, more surreal', Akerman has observed of the film, 'at night melodrama can come through'.²⁶ The film itself is a radically condensed melodrama, a distillation to dramatic essence of the elements of the genre. Set in the city of

26 *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 57, no. 675 (1990), back page

Brussels on a hot and brooding summer night, the film depicts a compendium of tales of desire and affliction, stripped to the core of intense, revelatory moments. As her husband remains sleeping, a middle-aged woman rises from their bed, pulls a suitcase from the closet, places it on the bed, packs her clothes, leaves the suburban home. A child slips out of the front door of her home, running into the night with a small bag grasped in one arm, her kitten clutched in the other. A woman sits alone in a bistro; time passes; suddenly a man bearing a suitcase bursts breathlessly through the door; they rush ecstatically, relievedly, towards one another.

The narrative begins and ends with a female character caught in a triangle of mismatched love. In between, the film unfolds a succession of vignettes of passion promised, thwarted, fulfilled, postponed, bereft. The stories are unrelated, but are to some extent linked by a limited number of revisited locations, in particular an inner-city apartment building. The narrative line returns periodically to follow the unfolding of one story or another, abandoning others begun, even as the stories and characters proliferate beyond any possibility of recall. The melodrama is not located in any one overwrought or blissful story but in this fleeting capture of an emotional infinite.

When present at all, dialogue in the film is brief, but it too is telegraphic, a condensed matter. The storyline is not carried in the dialogue but rather in the more filmic elements of gesture, movement, light, rhythm, sound. The buildup of a darkening storm that follows the summer heat of the evening adds to the sense of tension and tumescence: when it breaks, it ushers in a kind of release and, soon, the dawn.

Each scene is shot in real time and framed by an unmoving camera that stares with fixed and patient intensity into this dimly illuminated night. Time seems to distend in the silent gap between one breath and the next, one footfall and its other. Breaking the silence is the sound of the city, street traffic, footsteps on a staircase, a music box, a radio. Breaking the stillness is the movement of the players. In the dimness of this blue and black night, swathes of colour burst out with a particular luminosity, adding to the sense of overcharged sensuality. The red of a jukebox, the orange of a bar counter, the glowing sheen of bare skin, but above all and throughout, the shimmer of clothing on the players as they move about in the dark summer night.

Writing on mainstream cinema in the period this film was produced, Abigail Solomon-Godeau observes: 'the construction of the female (as different, as Other) inevitably relegates her to the object of the gaze (which is always male) rather than permitting her to be the origin of it . . .'.²⁷ Akerman's film shortcircuits this familiar scenario in several respects. The point-of-view shots by which the privileged identificatory routes are routinely marked in

27 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Winning the game when the rules have been changed: art photography and postmodernism', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 6 (1984), p. 100.

dominant cinema are flattened out by the unmoving, unaccenting camera, whose stillness further foregrounds, rather than effaces, the filmic event. (Indeed, the point of view the camera presents is overtly that of the filmmaker.) The camera is itself positioned in a mid-range zone too close for distanced mastery, too distant for voyeuristic peering. Unlike mainstream cinema, with its narrative focus on the male protagonist, the storyline is dispersed between many players, the film giving equal weight to every player in the frame. Men are brought into this play of passion not as the hero-possessors but as equally vulnerable partners in a dance of need and desire. The Oedipalized scenario of dominant cinema, with its attendant heterosexualism, is further undercut by the film's presentation of multiple desires and sexualities. The film is finally about desire: irrepressible, irrational, inchoate, unrepresentable. This is further underscored by the nonlinear narrative which ends, but cannot be said to conclude.

Akerman's film 'contaminates' the ideal space of structuralist film with the 'feminine' melodrama, while using formal devices drawn from structuralist film to undo the narrative conventions of the melodrama and thus to reconfigure the spectatorial vantage. Through both the melodrama and the film's use of structural elements, a space of feminine desire is doubly encoded in the film. And the place where these converge is in the clothing.

Dress forms an integral element of the film's formal strategies, in which light, colour, movement, rhythm and gesture are accentuated to sensual effect. The inflammation of colour that charges the screen and animates movement and gesture within the filmic space is rendered primarily through the women's clothes. A woman in a form-fitting *decolleté* sheath strides hurriedly towards a taxi, her form a vertical plane of red moving through the night. A couple clutch one another tightly in dance, the full skirt of the woman's patterned sundress swaying wildly across the screen; a woman stirs restlessly in bed, her nightdress a shimmer and flare of golden silk; a couple stroll arm-in-arm, the flirt of her skirt a distant motion on the horizon; a woman slowly descends a stairwell, the skirt, then waist, then bodice of her fitted shirtwaist charging centre screen with the cool allure of blue; the blue-white gleam of linen livens the dim surround.

But clothing also supports the narrative in its depiction of gendered subjects. On the one hand, these clothes are generic in that they are not linked to any period of fashion but are of undated contemporaneity. On the other hand, they are quite particular, all coded very much in the conventions of femininity and masculinity. While the men's clothes tend to conform to the fraternal uniform described by Veblen (hence the dark trousers and jackets less visually and sensually marked in the dim light), the women's clothes are more individual, colourful and sensual: well-fitted skirts and

dressess, some soft and flowing, others lean and trim, and most of a casual elegance: no jeans or trouser suits here!

In *Toute une nuit*, the women's clothes are imbued with sensuality as an integral part of the affect of the filmic text. Akerman aligns the 'surface' dimensions of melodrama (the emphasis on exteriorization of feeling over psychic interiority; the emotional clues lent to narrative by decor, setting, clothing; the favouring of narrative rhythm over action, narrative flow over resolution, and so on) to the visual texture of the film. The film subordinates the sensuality of movement and of colour, both provided principally by the clothes on the moving bodies, to the film's creation of a diffuse, libidinal surface that subtends yet exceeds the narrative.

In 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', Laura Mulvey outlines a heterosexual division of labour wherein the male protagonist occupies the three-dimensional space and illusory depths of the filmic image while the resources of the cinematic apparatus are marshalled to fix the female at the iconographic level of the surface. Similarly, the division between spectacle and narrative gives the masculine protagonist the advantage as the agent of the forward progression of narrative action.

In Akerman's film, however, men have no privilege within the diegetic space of the melodrama, the rhythms and motives of which are already aligned to the side of the feminine and which, in any case, gives equal weight to its female protagonists. But, more importantly, in Akerman's film, it is the *surface* itself that is marked as a libidinal space encoding desire in the feminine. The directionality by which the woman as spectacle is conventionally delivered to scopic possession is hijacked by Akerman, and dispersed. Through this displacement, in which the sensual clothing bridges the registers of narrative and film form (the structuring of vision), the passive 'feminine' of the spectacle is brought over to the side of desire.

If *Toute une nuit* works against the grain of the woman-as-spectacle, Brenda Longfellow's *Gerda* plays up spectacle with a vengeance, but positions the spectacle as an object of pleasure for the female – indeed, the feminist – spectator. Longfellow takes as her subject the figure of Gerda Munsinger, who achieved notoriety in Canada in the early 1960s. The Munsinger case undermined the credibility of the entire apparatus of government in the scandal and the Royal Commission that followed upon allegations that the security of the nation had potentially been compromised, under the preceding government, by the liaisons of two cabinet ministers with this foreign woman who was friendly with underworld figures and a known East German spy. The context of the film is Cold War politics, into which the identity of Gerda, German national,

displaced person and party girl, comes to be publicly inscribed as that of dangerous femme fatale in a paranoid narrative of Woman and nation.

The centrepiece of the film is a fictionalized enactment of scenes from Gerda's life as an adventuress hanging out in the nightclub scene for which Montreal was legendary, not to say notorious, in the 1950s. Intercut within these are several 'documentary' elements that evoke period genre: testimonial interviews (principally with Gerda's friend Berenice, another woman trawling the nightclub scene, and an investigator – the very picture of the hardboiled detective – who is put on the case when Gerda applies for immigrant status naming the two cabinet ministers as references); 'faux' documentary clips in cinema verite style, presented as 'flashbacks' by Gerda within the main filmic text, depicting scenes from a grim past (a rape in winter woods by a Russian soldier, a haunted stare through the wire fence of a detention camp); and, spliced into the introductory and concluding parts of the film, television interview clips of the 'real' Gerda Munsinger who, presumed to be dead, astonished the Canadian public by turning up very much alive to face down her accusers with a bracing dose of disdain towards their sexual hysteria. ('Sure I've been out with a man for dinner. . . . I'm a woman who lives her life.')

Gerda is presented as a woman/party girl/romantic/survivor whose economic existence, emotional life and social entertainment are secured through men. Thus her success as a woman is dependent to a great extent upon her success as a Woman, and her sense of herself is as a very successful Woman indeed. 'You know, many women have asked me, "Gerda, how do you do it?"', she confides to Berenice. 'I'm not a Monroe, I'm not a Bardot. . . . I believe if a woman wants to make for herself some kind of career, she must learn to listen: you *listen*, you *admire*.' Her consummate skill in displaying her femininity is depicted in a scene where, disgusted by the lacklustre performance of a cabaret singer ('*Canadische* women know *nothing* how to move'), she takes to the stage of the half-empty club to demonstrate, with provocative sensuality, how to sing it with style. The performance of femininity is doubled in a scene with Berenice where the two, in near-matching couturier gowns with exaggerated petticoat bustle, dance together for and towards the appreciative eye of a masculine patron. The film fiction at once foregrounds the manipulation, and the effectiveness, of these manoeuvres.

Gerda performs a masquerade of femininity in the sense that her femininity is a 'disguise', a mask that can be put on to achieve particular effects. Yet Gerda's performance of femininity is a game that lacks the measure of anxiety that marks the masquerade in Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a masquerade'.²⁸ For Gerda, masquerade is a part of the toolkit of an already-constituted femininity,

²⁸ Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a masquerade', in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35–45.

exaggerated as seduction.

In Riviere's account, masquerade is an ill-fitting disguise of femininity put on by the woman in her case study to cloak masculine attributes and so to avert (fantasized) male retribution. This masquerade betrayed an anxiety about her masculine identification, for which the 'cover-up' of exaggerated femininity was both neurotic symptom and defensive strategy. Riviere went on famously to aver that, in essence, there is no real distinction to be drawn between 'real' womanliness and the artifice of masquerade: 'whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing'.²⁹ In her appropriation to the scene of cinema of Riviere's clinical concept of the masquerade, Mary Ann Doane initially foregrounds its effectivity in underscoring the woman's creation of a gap between self and image. 'The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance'.³⁰ In a subsequent revision of this influential text, taking greater account of the pathological aspect of the masquerade and its surrender of subject position, Doane allows that masquerade is not readily recuperable as a feminist strategy.³¹

But Longfellow succeeds in utilizing dimensions of feminine masquerade in effect by separating out the joined elements of 'strategy' and 'symptom'. In this move, her diegetic framing assigns the 'strategy' to Gerda but locates the 'pathology' of the masquerade not in its female practitioner but in the strictly patrolled boundaries of gender and class that at once restrict, contain and produce Gerda's options as a woman. If Gerda's performance of femininity is not compulsive, it is nonetheless compulsory. At the same time, Longfellow incorporates 'pleasure' among the attributes of Gerda's performance of femininity, a pleasure that, in reverting to a privileged female spectatorial position, grants that spectacle and masquerade are not directed only towards men's pleasure and gaze. And of course clothing, as an integral aspect of both the display and expression of embodied femininity, plays a pivotal part in achieving this effect.

Clothes are an important structuring element of the narrative of *Gerda*. The friendship between Gerda and Berenice begins when, finding themselves side by side in mirrored reflection in the ladies' room of a Montreal nightclub, each wearing the same extravagant hat of feather and fluff, Gerda responds to this awkward moment by whipping off her hat, taking off a few of its feathers, folding a section down, and repinning it: *voilà*, two different hats. Berenice returns the favour, alerting Gerda to the attention she has aroused in one of the club patrons, Pierre Sevigny, deputy minister of Defence in the Canadian government, and introducing them. And so the entanglements, including her benighted fantasies of marriage with the married minister, begin.

In her 'career', Gerda is meticulously, and expensively, fashionable. When she becomes ill and falls on hard times, it is the

²⁹ Ibid., p. 38

³⁰ Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the masquerade: theorizing the female spectator', in *Femmes Fatales*

³¹ Mary Ann Doane, 'Masquerade reconsidered', in *Femmes Fatales*



Gerda and Berenice in *Gerda*
(Brenda Longfellow, 1992)

selling off of her glamorous gowns and beloved furs that marks the fall. (The detective advances evidence to suggest a subsequent descent into overt prostitution.) It is in replenishing her wardrobe by means of a lightfingered shopping spree with a girlfriend (the scene in the fitting-room of the elegant shop, a giddy piling of dress over dress) that this part of her life is brought to a close. She is arrested and, already under surveillance, an awkward, excessive, presence to her powerful 'contacts', political and *mafiosi*, is abruptly deported.

Yet Gerda's stylish and extravagant clothes are more than the requisite lure to the attention and desire of the necessary lovers. They are a displaced form of bodily narcissism (as Hanson observes, 'one thing fashion never lets the soul forget is its body').³² They are the occasion for extravagant self-display, for the pleasure of seeing oneself through the refraction of the desiring look of an other. They are the fetishized reifications in commodity form of a host of cherished values. They are the emblem of Gerda's climb from poverty, the measure of her social skills, the joy of her creative expression, the pleasure of her femininity. Thus they are not only a part of the masquerade's being-for-others, although they are also that, but a narcissistic being-for-self.

If Gerda the character identifies with femininity, spectacle (as the 'sight' she presents) and masquerade (as the excessive self-representation of femininity), a distancing from these guises is integral to the film's enunciative strategies. This distancing is achieved through devices such as foregrounding the historical nature of the narrative through an overcharged accentuation of period style/cliche in everything from clothing and gender roles to media genres and political narrative; in its 'reportage' of character, situation and event through its documentary elements; and, in the fictional narrative, in its emphasis on the gestures and actions of the players over psychological 'depth' or motivation. The gap effected between the feminist frame of the film and the feminine protagonist within it, the space between the distancing devices of the film and the identificatory processes intrinsic to narrative, is central in *Gerda's* privileging of the spectatorial position as feminist.

Longfellow's strategies of distancing unsettle the standard operation of classical cinema, in which the element of 'masquerade' is elided to construct spectacle as transparent femininity and thus to make femininity available to structures of voyeuristic and fetishistic looking. In the male/female, space/surface split of classical cinematic operations, Gerda occupies both the diegetic 'space' and depth of narrative and the 'surface' of spectacle: the spectacle is thus inserted *into* the narrative. Spectacle as the sight/site of strategic masquerade, foregrounded in the narrative, works against ready masculine appropriation: it does not effect a similar foreclosure from the female/feminist point of view.

Riviere's concept of femininity as masquerade is dependent upon

a binary construct whose correlate is masculinity as authenticity or norm. In the patriarchal order of language, these positions, of phallus and lack, are assigned along the axis of gender. But it is also the case that this is an imaginary relational construct (though its effects are real enough, a point the film also explores). No one has the phallus, and lack is the lot of everyone, a condition of entry into the symbolic. If femininity is a masquerade, masculinity is equally a charade, and Longfellow pointedly exploits the clichés of masculinity: the tacky investigator, the suave womanizer, the hypocrite adulterer, the boys'-night-out conventioneer. Thus the film directs attention towards the historical and material practices which constitute and determine the boundaries, definitions and 'styles' of gender.

In reconstituting Gerda's masquerade as a (historically) situated compound of strategy and pleasure, Longfellow's enunciative strategies favour the female spectator who can, as it were, have her cake and eat it too. The double register marks out a female spectatorial position which offers a level of pleasure in the 'sight' of spectacle, display and feminine masquerade without aligning this to an identification with the passive feminine. Further, the assimilation of spectacular clothing to Gerda's being-for-self, highlighted in virtually every scene of the fictional narrative, offers an additional level of narcissistic identificatory pleasure to, as Freud would have it, 'all women'. In a film that denaturalizes the feminine and proffers a critique of gender relations, Longfellow nonetheless allows a space for female pleasure that acknowledges, in the accoutrements of the feminine, 'the strength of the allure, the richness of the fantasy, and the quality of the compensation'.³³

³³ Gaines, 'Fabricating the female body', p. 6.

Each of these three films subverts, in distinct ways, the conventional operations of classical cinematic forms and their invocation of identificatory positions predicated on a model of masculine subjectivity. But the films also offer challenging interventions into the modes of feminist filmmaking predominant in the periods in which they were made. *So Where's My Prince, Already?* overrides the sober realist forms predominant in early feminist cinema (the so-called 'positive images' approach) with a hyperbole that enlists laughter as a critical tool of distanciation. The film is very much of its period, however, in an ethic now seemingly missing from a more theoretically grounded feminism: an exhilarating *effrontery* towards established canons of feminine propriety, identity and place. *Toute une nuit* is altogether deconstructive in its approach to the patriarchal legacy of cinema, yet sets itself apart from other work of the period by extending the deconstructive emphasis on negation – on dislodging dominant codes through laying bare the mechanisms of representation – into the symbolization of an alternate, non-phallic, register of desire. *Gerda* explores a hybrid textual form

that blurs the boundaries of fictional and documentary realism, while recasting cultural memory and national identity by resituating the narrative of Gerda from that of the 'universal' feminine to that of a woman negotiating her position with regard to gender from within material relations of power and representation.

The films also suggest an approach to the representation of women that differs in its strategies from the two principal, and quite incompatible, approaches of early feminist cinema: work in realist forms that sought to alter the content of film by privileging new sorts of protagonists and subject matter centred on women's lives, as against work on film form that refuses the positivity of any new naturalization of women, concentrating rather on problematizing the processes of identification in narrative illusionism and organizing alternate modes of visibility. These three films, by contrast, emphasize the difference of women from Woman through a *layering* of narrative realism and through distancing enunciative strategies, doubling the registers of feminine and feminist to address the constructed nature of the feminine, but through an *embodiment* that does not revert to a renaturalization. That clothing is a primary vehicle for these operations which take place across different generations and models of film practice suggests a particular potency and viability of this cultural sign for the address of 'that impossible body'.

Each of the films takes as protagonist the feminine woman. Yet this figure is sympathetically appropriated for, while kept distinct from, another scene, operating in another – feminist – register. This is achieved through narrative, mise-en-scene, formal and structural properties specific to film, which provide the 'frame' within which this dialectical double register is mounted. Each of the films challenges classical cinema's alignment of scopic pleasure to the mastering properties of the 'male gaze'; indeed, an integral part of this layering is the incorporation of strategies of address that privilege women as spectators.

Clothing as a social sign provides a vehicle for these processes of denaturalization of the feminine. But clothing also has effectivity in these films as the delegate of desire. In *So Where's My Prince Already?*, when the bride turns dolefully away from the display of new wedding gowns, it is not her narcissistic desire but rather its chronic deprivation that is at issue. In *Toute une nuit*, the allure of feminine clothing is highlighted and assimilated to the creation of a filmic register of feminine desire. *Gerda* offers up a festive parade of spectacular gowns, elegant streetwear and sporty chic as the film puts into circulation the enactment of gender roles as cliché, as power and as pleasure.

Clothing is integral to the representation of gender. (As the drag queen Rupert Charles summarizes it, 'Honey, if you're in clothes, you're in drag'.)³⁴ In shifting attention from bodies (nature) to dress

³⁴ Cited in Gammon and Makinen, *Female Fetishism*, p. 5.

(culture), it underscores that gender codes, though aligned to (sexed) bodies, are not fixed: these codes not only vary between cultures, but may multiply within a culture. Clothes are the necessary props in the performance of gender, be this the conventions of the 'natural' (with its corollary of deviance or artifice), or a subversive reinscription of the clothing signifier through oppositional and subcultural dress, or the gender-bending of crossdressing. Dress may be the agent of subversion, parody, adventure, fantasy, exploration, play. As sign and medium, clothing offers a critical site around which questions of spectatorship and representation, being and appearance, gender and desire can *move*, unfixing the binaries of phallic and feminine.

Mary Ann Doane has described the emergence of the figure of the femme fatale in the nineteenth century, the period of a shift in the social imaginary of sexual difference already pointed to through terms such as *The Invisible Man* and *The Great Masculine Renunciation*. Doane notes that 'if the femme fatale overrepresents the body it is because she is attributed with a body which is itself given agency independently of consciousness. In a sense, she has power *despite herself*.'³⁵ Doane's account stresses the femme fatale as the representative of displaced masculine fears about the loss of the centrality of self. 'These anxieties', she argues, 'appear quite explicitly in the process of her representation as castration anxiety.'³⁶ The femme fatale is an emphatic instance of more general operations within classical film, however, wherein this passive female body, not the subject of its own powers but object of fear and fascination for the masculine subject, is subject to strategies which would contain the threat she poses.

Within women's films, however, the categories of analysis which locate and describe the position of the woman in classical film prove insufficient as descriptives for the diegetic and formal operations that stage, for the female spectator, images *for* her and *of* her; operations that do not turn on the defence against castration anxiety. These privileged tropes take on different meanings when the woman is not the object of imaginary masculine possession but is the subject repossessed by women filmmakers. Narcissism is a bedrock of identity, a primary condition from which later identificatory processes arise. While associated pejoratively with the feminine in its secondary manifestations, in feminist representation it may also signify a being-for-self antithetical to the being-for-others of the feminine position. In this sense, clothing and adornment are positioned not in a closed circuit of self-reflection, nor necessarily as a passive lure for the active look, but as a calibrated social act with many possible implications. Masquerade has a different inflection when, rather than the defining feature of womanliness, it is seen as a strategic mobilization and negotiation of gender self-representation in a *mise-en-scene* of a performativity of gender. The position of the

³⁵ Mary Ann Doane, 'Deadly women, epistemology, and film theory', in *Femmes Fatales*, p. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

37 These three spectatorial positions are described in Doane's 'Film and the masquerade' with respect to the potential of masquerade to generate differently 'a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman (spectator)' (p. 32). Doane's article, however, references the masquerade in Hollywood cinema and not in feminist film, where it has the potential for greater viability in precisely these operations.

spectator with respect to the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the woman in spectacle is realigned in the diegetic operations of feminist film that present spectacle through the character not of the passive woman who 'has power *despite herself*', but as the subject of her self-presentation and allure, and in which her performance is structured in the cinematic operations for female delectation. The position these films accord the spectator as female, *looking*, undercut the structural dominance in classic cinematic operations of the 'male gaze', creating new positions for the female spectator beyond the parameters of a transvestite masculinity, masochism or narcissism's radical assumption of the image.³⁷

When the object of address within feminist film criticism is classical cinema and its representations of the woman, a certain stability obtains. But insofar as women's intervention into these codes have effectivity, they also have implications that impinge upon the mapping of psychoanalytic categories onto the field of representation. Can terms such as narcissism, spectacle, masquerade and the male gaze 'stay in their place' when women as subjects of desire take hold of the props of gender to their own gender-disruptive ends? Clothing as sign of desire, embodiment and culture is a privileged site around which such questions converge and multiply.

I would like to thank Lisa Tickner for her helpful comments during the development of this text.

Blue Velvet: a parable of male development

LYNNE LAYTON

1 Lynda K. Bundtzen, "'Don't look at me!': woman's body, woman's voice in *Blue Velvet*", *Western Humanities Review*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1988), pp. 187–203; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Jane M. Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny in *Blue Velvet*', *Genders*, no. 13 (1992), pp. 73–89.

2 Most critics who discuss the film use Freudian categories, such as the Oedipus complex, the primal scene, Frank as representing the forces of the id. See, for example, Tracy Biga, '*Blue Velvet*', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1 (1987), pp. 44–9; Bundtzen, "'Don't look at me!':"; James F. Maxfield, "'Now it's dark": the child's dream in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*', *Post Script*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1989), pp. 2–17.

3 Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny', p. 78. Others argue that the film makes neither psychological nor narrative sense. See, for example, John Simon, 'Neat trick', *National Review*, 7 November 1986, pp. 54, 56; and C. Kenneth Pellow, '*Blue Velvet* once more', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1990), pp. 173–8.

Blue Velvet (David Lynch, 1986) has stirred up a number of critical controversies relevant to feminist film criticism: is the film paradigmatic of postmodernism or stuck in the crudest of binaries? If it is postmodern, what version of postmodernism does it proffer – the one that decentres what Kaja Silverman has called the 'dominant fiction' of phallic wholeness?¹ Or the one that is the psychological and moral equivalent of contemporary capitalist relations of production, the one that Jane Shattuc calls the new patriarchal dominant of commercial postmodernism? Does the film's style deconstruct the narrative's logic or mime it? Is the film an enactment of an Oedipal scenario?² Or is Shattuc right to argue that Freudian categories are incapable of describing what goes on psychologically in the film?³

The analyses occasioned by *Blue Velvet*'s stylistic and content confusions reveal some of the contradictions in the critical vocabularies of contemporary film theory and psychoanalytic theory. As feminist film theory ponders male development, and psychoanalytic theory deconstructs the drives and the Oedipal story, *Blue Velvet* seems again to be a film worth looking at. For *Blue Velvet* offers a view of male development that sheds light on the interplay between Oedipal and pre-Oedipal fantasies and fixations in our particular historical moment, and thus sheds light on contemporary gender relations. Before turning to Lynch's parable of male development, I would like to look at recent figurations of the pre-Oedipal in feminist film theory and in contemporary psychoanalytic theory.

- 4 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6-18; *Camera Obscura*, special issue titled 'Male Trouble', no. 17 (1988).
- 5 Parveen Adams, 'Per os(cillation)', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 7-29; Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and male subjectivity', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 31-66; Paul Smith, 'Vas', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 89-111.
- 6 Thomas DiPiero, 'The patriarch is not (just) a man', *Camera Obscura*, nos. 25-6 (1991), pp. 101-24.
- 7 Gaylyn Studlar, 'Masochism and the perverse pleasures of the cinema', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods, Volume II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 602-21; Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and male subjectivity', p. 66, footnote 51.

Feminist film criticism has moved from Laura Mulvey's focus on the way film works to enable a male spectator to secure his sense of solidity and dominance to a focus on what the editors of *Camera Obscura* recently called 'male trouble'.⁴ The shift here is in part a move from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal dynamics. Male trouble includes those aspects of male development that challenge the reign of the Phallus and the masculine and feminine positions it prescribes (for example, see Parveen Adams's discussion of the male's pre-Oedipal oscillation in gender identifications; and Kaja Silverman's notion of imaginary vs symbolic identifications). In Adams's and Silverman's work (as well as in Paul Smith's 'Vas'⁵), the pre-Oedipal is figured as resistant to the phallic 'dominant fiction' and thus is seen as subversive (in the same way that hysteria has been seen as a subversive protest against dominant versions of femininity). While these critics challenge the supremacy of the Oedipus complex, they nonetheless remain confined within Freudian categories, interpreting, as Freud does, the pre-Oedipal backwards from the vantage point of what is supposed to happen in the Oedipus. Thus, they allow Freud's 'story' of male and female development to obscure other possible developmental scenarios. As DiPiero argues in his response to these articles, there is a problem in granting such legitimacy to Freud's story. If you posit castration and sexual difference as the central organizers of culture, you cannot escape hegemonic masculinity, even if you envision a pre-Oedipal realm that works in opposition to the Oedipal: the exception merely proves the rule.⁶

Gaylyn Studlar is one of the few film critics to have let pre-Oedipal categories stand on their own terms; Kaja Silverman dismisses Studlar's work in one footnote as biological and apolitical, claiming that to focus an argument solely at the level of the pre-Oedipal is to participate in a disavowal of the Law, the Law that performs a second fragmentation on a subject already fragmented by nature.⁷ Silverman's criticism assumes a view of the pre-Oedipal mother as a phallic mother, which presupposes that what is disavowed at the pre-Oedipal level is castration, the actuality of fragmentation. But this fantasy of a phallic mother also reads development backwards from the Oedipal: indeed, the phallic mother is a phallic fantasy every bit as violent towards women as its complement, the view that women are deficient.

The question, however, is: where do these binary fantasies come from? Several analysts have offered pre-Oedipal interpretations that go beyond a Freudian framework. Chasseguet-Smirgel, for example, has argued that the pre-Oedipal mother's power comes from the child's dependence on her. The child experiences such helpless dependency as a narcissistic wound and defensively flees it, with boys and girls showing different defensive styles. In such a view, the fantasy of merging with a phallic mother would be interpreted not as

- 8 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, 'Freud and female sexuality: the consideration of some blind spots in the exploration of the "Dark Continent"', in *Sexuality and Mind: The Role of the Father and the Mother in the Psyche* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), pp. 9–28. See also Madelon Sprengnether's discussion of Freud's defensive theorizing of the Oedipus complex, 'Anticipating Oedipus', in *The Spectral Mother* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 13–21.
- 9 Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
- 10 Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and subjectivity', *Framework*, no. 12 (1980), pp. 2–9.
- 11 The secret of male dependence is dealt with in interesting ways in many genres that one might consider male, such as classic hard-boiled detective fiction, male buddy films (especially the subgenre that centres on unwilling buddies), heavy metal. Connection and recognition between men are central, but connection often occurs almost on the sly. See David Leverenz for an important study of male–male relations in popular culture, 'The last real man in America: from Natty Bumppo to Batman', *American Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1991), pp. 753–81.

a stage of development but as one of many defences against dependency.⁸ Dependency is, in fact, a category which Freud's rhetoric consistently evades: the resulting theoretical nonsequiturs betray his discomfort. Chasseguet-Smirgel argues that Oedipal theory and the 'sexual phallic monism' at the core of Freud's theory of male and female development are, in part, defensive strategies to manage the power of the mother and the state of helpless dependency. Freudian theory tends to cover over dependency by eroticizing it (making what is pre-Oedipal look Oedipal): a fairly typical male defence against experiencing dependency. As Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin have shown, the fact that women are responsible for child care, and thus become culturally associated with dependency and nurturance, makes the pre-Oedipal every bit as political as the Oedipal. Indeed, that fact determines the nature of both the pre-Oedipal and the Oedipal, the nature of the phallic law.⁹

Studlar's work, too, accepts an Oedipal/pre-Oedipal binary and tends to dehistoricize development. In opposition to Mulvey's view of a sadistic, voyeuristic cinematic apparatus, Studlar offers a masochistic aesthetic that, for example, reinterprets the mother as complete rather than lacking, and the fetish as a transitional object promoting self-cohesion rather than a stand-in for the missing phallus. While Studlar's work, and Silverman's earlier work on the pleasures of passivity,¹⁰ are important challenges to Mulvey, each errs in trying to fix one aesthetic by which film operates (and one psychology by which spectators operate). What I will argue here is that films such as *Blue Velvet* (and most of Lynch's other films) enact both the masochistic and the sadistic dynamics put forward by Mulvey and Studlar, but that the best way to understand these dynamics is by starting with male trouble on the pre-Oedipal level, working forward to male trouble on the Oedipal level, and historicizing both of them. The fantasy of symbiosis with the complete mother is but the flip side of the competitive rivalry with the father and its resultant heroic isolation: neither is subversive. Jeffrey Beaumont, the hero of *Blue Velvet*, seeks knowledge of things that he knows are there but have always been hidden. The big secrets in such male discourse are male dependency, desire for the pre-Oedipal, nurturant father, and female agency; and *Blue Velvet* enacts the struggle between keeping and breaking the secrets.¹¹

Ironically, although psychoanalytic feminist film criticism in both its mid 1970s and current forms works almost exclusively within Freudian and Lacanian categories (an interesting exercise would be to count the number of exegeses of 'A child is being beaten' in feminist film criticism), Anglo-American psychoanalysts in the same period have moved further and further away from the drives and the

privileging of Oedipus. While some may criticize this move as a retreat from the political or from Freudian radicalism, I would argue the opposite. Certainly contemporary analytic schools – such as self-psychology, object relations, the intersubjective and the relational school – have not, in abandoning drive theory, abandoned such notions as the dynamic unconscious and the repetition compulsion. And contemporary analytic theory is much more focused on actual interactions between caretakers and infants, and so is less vulnerable to criticisms of ahistoricity and universalism than are Freud and Lacan – and perhaps less vulnerable to phallic fantasies as well.

Since the 1970s, the focus of analytic theory has been the cohesion of the self (considered good) and threats to such cohesion (considered bad, which makes this theory antithetical to that of Lacan). Heinz Kohut's work on narcissistic disorders and Otto Kernberg's work on both borderline and narcissistic states shifted analytic attention from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal dynamics.¹² Just as postmodern discourse began to celebrate the foundational fragmentation of the self, analytic discourse began to lament the frequency with which clients suffered not from Oedipal guilt but from fragmentation that had its roots in pre-Oedipal trauma.

Central both to analytic discourse about self-disorders and to discourse about trauma is the notion of splitting. People with self-disorders, as well as trauma victims (and the correlations are apparently high between diagnoses of borderline personality disorder and abuse histories) are fragmented in particular ways: they tend to split the world affectively, cognitively, and relationally into all good and all bad representations that remain entirely separate. While splitting is a normal defence of early childhood (keeping separate the good and the bad breast/mother), in the best of outcomes one becomes able to tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence about the self, others, the world. In the worst of outcomes, everything remains split and the subject never fully differentiates self from other. This worst case scenario might occur when the world on which the subject depends has been consistently unreliable or harshly aggressive.

Jessica Benjamin has posited another origin of narcissistic disorder, one more normative in the culture. In *The Bonds of Love*, she draws on the findings of those who observe infant–parent interactions and uncovers within these interactions a dialectic of assertion and recognition, a desire to be recognized as a subject by another subject, who in turn is recognized as a related but separate centre of initiative. Benjamin sees the roots of the breakdown of this dialectic of mutuality in the pre-Oedipal rapprochement subphase of development, which is where Kernberg places the origin of borderline and narcissistic disorder. One of Benjamin's many contributions is to attribute the breakdown in part to gender inequalities: the mother's primacy in the caretaking of children, the

¹² Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International University Press, 1971); *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International University Press, 1977); Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1975); *Internal World and External Reality* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1985).

father's intermittent presence and, particularly, to both psychoanalytic theory's and the culture's refusal to grant agency to the mother. The master-slave, subject-object, doer-done to structure of western philosophy and life is the outcome of the breakdown of mutuality that occurs in the pre-Oedipal phase of development. In Benjamin's theory, men become subjects not fully differentiated from mother, eternally stuck in a recurrent battle to turn the other into an object, yet longing for recognition from a subject both like and different.¹³

Thus, in contemporary psychoanalytic theory, pre-Oedipal problems are disorders of attachment, disorders of dependency and trust, as well as disorders of self – and gender identifications are major constituents of how these disorders are expressed. As theoretical and cultural representations less and less frequently show the capacity to tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity, one begins to fear that narcissistic, schizoid and borderline dynamics, while far from normal, may well be the norm. Christopher Lasch was perhaps right both to identify a culture of narcissism, and in his view that the modal figure/logic of contemporary life is not the schizophrenic, as Jameson and others have argued, but the narcissist and the traumatized/traumatizer.¹⁴ Thus, the pre-Oedipal, as we live it culturally and represent it in film, is not at all necessarily subversive of the Oedipal. Rather, what people call the Oedipal – the disidentification with mother and with all things culturally coded feminine; rivalry with the father – may be no more than the further evolution of pre-Oedipal failures.

This brings me to David Lynch and *Blue Velvet*. While the 'secret' is one of Lynch's favourite tropes, it is by now no secret that abuse and the abuse victim are central to his aesthetic (and indeed central to much postmodern art). From one of his earliest films, *The Grandmother* (1970), in which a boy abused by his parents grows a benevolent grandmother from seeds, to *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), in which Laura Palmer discovers that her longtime secret abuser is her father, David Lynch has consistently chronicled the horrors of social and family life: in Lynch's world, parents are completely unreliable, if not abusive. And it is important to note that his victims are not always female and his perpetrators not always male: the Elephant Man (*The Elephant Man* [1980]), for example, is abused by his 'owner' and, Lynch suggests, by his more benevolent medical patron; the mother in *Wild at Heart* (1990) is the abuser.

But in *Blue Velvet*, Lynch offers a psychology of the abuser/abused and a psychology of male development that begin to map a patriarchal dominant marked by the kind of pre-Oedipal defences characteristic of narcissistic and borderline personality disorders: splitting and fragmentation, primitive idealization, projection,

¹³ Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, especially chapters 1 and 2, pp. 11–84.

¹⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979). Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and consumer society', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 111–25.

denial, omnipotence and devaluation, identity diffusion (including gender identity), and rage about dependency. In Lynch's world, and in our own perhaps, the particular Oedipal resolutions that follow are two: the lobotomized Mr Happy Face; and his flip side, the rageful, violent but impotent sociopath.

Much of the early criticism of *Blue Velvet* noted Lynch's dichotomous world view. Critics spoke of a 'startling mixture of naivete and kinkiness', 'candy sweet scenes of picture postcard America' against 'scenes of horrific sexual violence';¹⁵ and of the stark contrast between Frank's obscene language and Sandy's syrupy sentimentality. While some applauded the disjunction between Sandy's world of robins and love and Frank's dark world of sadomasochism (largely those who saw the sentimentality as ironic commentary on the more real darkness), others called Lynch and his film immature, a vision with no middle ground.¹⁶ Interviews, as well as Lynch's other films, bear out the conviction that Lynch sees the world as split between innocence and naivete vs sickness and horror;¹⁷ or, in Karen Jaehne's film history terms, between Frank Capra and film noir.¹⁸ In *Eraserhead* (1977), Henry, the beleaguered father of the deformed, controlling infant he finally kills, unites with The Lady in the Radiator, who sings that in heaven, everything is fine. Laura Palmer, in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, unites with Agent Cooper and meets the angel she had to erase from the picture on her bedroom wall once she realized her abuser was her father. Sailor and Lula, in *Wild at Heart*, find a space safe from Lula's wicked witch mother and nightmare flashbacks of abuse, Sailor's lack of 'parental guidance'. And the Elephant Man holds fast to the pictures of his benevolent mother and his benefactress after a life of abuse from his 'owner', the rabble, and medical science. Do Lynch's films overcome these splits? Do they reveal splitting as a mechanism arising from the problems he explores? Or does he formally enact the splitting that is at the centre of the content of his films?

Feminist film criticism has always focused on the endemic splitting enacted against women in Hollywood films. Women who write about *Blue Velvet* have been most concerned with the way Lynch treats women in the film and have disagreed about the function of Lynch's propensity towards splitting. Early reviews on Lynch and women were critical, although Tracy Biga—working from relational feminist theory and from E. Ann Kaplan's question, do women want to possess the gaze? argues tentatively that Sandy represents an alternative gaze of affirmation and affiliation.¹⁹ Linda Bundtzen's 'Don't look at me! woman's body, woman's voice in *Blue Velvet*' is one of the few articles that tries to rescue Lynch from charges of misogyny. She performs this feat by suggesting that Lynch's postmodern style subverts the classic relations of looking embodied in the film. Her sense is that while one could easily see the film through the lens of Mulvey's theory, Lynch takes away the viewer's

15 David Ansen, 'Stranger than paradise: Lynch's nightmare tour of homespun America', *Newsweek*, 15 September 1986, p. 69; Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny', p. 73.

16 See Karen Jaehne, 'Blue Velvet', *Cineaste*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1987), pp. 38–41; John Powers, 'Bleak chic', *American Film*, vol. 12, no. 5 (1987), pp. 46–51.

17 Lynch says in an interview with David Chute, 'This is all the way America is to me. There's a very innocent, naive quality to my life, and there's a horror and a sickness as well', cited in Betsy Berry, 'Forever, in my dreams: generic conventions and the subversive imagination in *Blue Velvet*', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1988), p. 82.

18 Jaehne, 'Blue Velvet', p. 38. Lynch's split world is discussed in Bundtzen, "'Don't look at me!'" ; Powers, 'Bleak chic'; Pellow, 'Blue Velvet once more'; Maxfield, "'Now it's dark'" ; Berry, 'Forever, in my dreams'.

19 Tracy Biga, 'Blue Velvet', pp. 44–9; E. Ann Kaplan, 'Is the gaze male?', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 309–27.

20 Bundtzen, "'Don't look at me!'",
p. 192.

pleasure in looking at Dorothy by filming her naked body in nonerotic ways and by making the viewer feel the hero's shame at looking, his shame at expressing his sadistic impulses on the female body. She argues that Dorothy remains a mystery through to the end, which 'undermines an audience's confidence in Lynch's image and frustrates its desire to know and understand his world'.²⁰ Bundtzen interprets the final scene, in which Dorothy embraces her son, Donny, in a sunlit park, as evidence that Dorothy escapes the representations imposed upon her. She writes:

Underneath, Dorothy is maternal plenitude, the good mother, a figure of love and care, and all of her representations are fantasies imposed on the maternal to enact childish aggressions toward her. In this, Lynch as director plays a role for his audience like the one Frank claims in relation to Jeffrey: he is 'A candy-colored clown they call the Sandman' and Blue Velvet is his dream of total possession of the mother: 'In dreams you're mine, all of the time.' Lynch presents a waking dream, however, forcing us to see the cloying 'candy-colored' nature of his illusion, and the result is a nightmare like Jeffrey's where the mother is shamefully cannibalized . . .'.²¹

21 Ibid.

Indeed, the film's final image evokes Dorothy with the object of her desire, her son. But has Dorothy here escaped a male representational economy? Whose fantasy is the fantasy of maternal plenitude? And why do so few critics note how deeply woven together are violence and impotence in this film? To answer these questions, one needs to go beyond Freudian categories.

While less certain than Bundtzen that the film's style subverts its message, I agree wholeheartedly that the dream at the centre of the film is one of total possession of the mother. But here, as elsewhere in male popular culture, the emotional intensity of the film seems less focused on women, or on the relationship between women and men, than on men and their relations with each other. As Bundtzen's title suggests, 'Don't look at me!', which Frank yells repeatedly at Dorothy, is precisely the emotional point: it literalizes the breakdown in male-female mutuality of which Benjamin's intersubjective theory speaks. What Bundtzen does not comment upon, however, is the moment when the injunction reverses to 'Look at me!' Frank speaks this to Jeffrey at the climax of Jeffrey's initiation rite into manhood, the scene where Frank 'fucks with' Jeffrey. How and why does this shift from female to male centrality occur?

The film suggests that the mother's gaze stirs reminders of dependency and reminders that the mother has agency and thus can leave (indeed, Frank kidnaps Dorothy's son, which makes Donny the victim of maternal abandonment). So the dream must strip woman of her capacity to desire. Yet, the only woman who could

fulfil Frank's desire is the one who wants him all the time, the one whose desire is focused solely on him. If he desires her, but her desire is not solely for him, his dependency and fear of abandonment are revealed. To avoid revelation of this secret – female agency and male dependence – woman's desire is rendered irrelevant, dependency is projected onto her, and what is left is a world that tries to function solely around the various looks between men. But the castration of female agency leaves the men violent and impotent, desperately searching for *something* from each other, but not knowing what. Lynch dramatizes this primal scene of our culture by making his film a parable of male development, a parable in which one grows from power as a male baby, rid of the father and in possession of the mother, to impotence as a man.

In the first scenes of *Blue Velvet*, an elderly man suffers a stroke while watering his suburban lawn. We next see him in hospital, hooked up to machines and weeping because he cannot speak to his son, Jeffrey Beaumont, the film's protagonist. On his way home from the hospital, Jeffrey finds an ear in a field and takes it to the police station. Detective Williams, father of Jeffrey's love interest to be, Sandy, warns Jeffrey away from the dangers of life. But he cannot solve the crime, indeed does not even know that one of his top men is involved in the crime. The benevolent town fathers are impotent: Jeffrey cannot depend on them to protect him or to reveal to him the secrets of life. The first lesson of Oedipal masculinity is that fathers cannot help you become a man: what you do, you must do alone (even though Sandy offers help, her attempts never quite work out). The film suggests, however, that once you are a man, you are useless.

Jeffrey is investigating the mystery of the severed ear, the mystery of the castrated, impotent father. His investigation leads to Dorothy, the enigmatic woman; but the mission is to discover the mystery of masculinity. The film begins with the mention of losses and underscores the hero's isolation: Jeffrey has not only lost a connection to his father, but his mother barely looks up from the television when he enters a room, and he mournfully tells Sandy that all his friends are gone from the town.

Those critics who see the film as an Oedipal drama argue that Frank and Dorothy become Jeffrey's surrogate parents – Dorothy initiating Jeffrey into sexuality, Frank teaching him what beer to drink and how to be polite on the family trip to Pussy Heaven, the pivotal scene of the film.²² Dorothy and Frank, totally unpredictable parents, make Jeffrey aware of the drives, of sex and aggression, and finally lead him to accept, with his new self-knowledge, the Law of civilization. Indeed, critics also see Lynch's film as a kind of 'Civilization and its Discontents', in which Frank represents the id, sex and aggression, lying just beneath a surface of civilization.

²² See, for example, Maxfield, '“Now it's dark”', p. 2; Biga, 'Blue Velvet', p. 46.

Lynch's camera, however, focuses as frequently on signifiers of Frank's impotence as on signifiers of his power, subverting any easy equation of Frank with the id and returning us to the pre-Oedipal and to male trouble.

On his second trip to Dorothy's apartment, Jeffrey searches each of her rooms, but the camera singles out and pauses in closeup on only one object, a child's hat. Hiding behind the closet, Jeffrey hears Dorothy talking on the telephone, asking Don (her husband) if little Donny is all right. The camera comes close up to Dorothy as she says, 'Mummy loves you'. The object of Dorothy's desire is revealed to be her kidnapped son (although it is unclear if it is Donny or 'baby' Frank on the line; Frank, indeed, longs to take the place of her baby). Jeffrey later tells Sandy that Dorothy wants to die, that Frank has kidnapped her son and husband as bait to keep her alive. When she hangs up, Dorothy reaches under the couch and looks at a hidden picture: Jeffrey's last act before leaving the apartment is to look at the picture, which is of Don and Donny (in his hat), and then at the marriage certificate behind it. 'Oh my God, the hat', he says. 'She's married. Don.' Solving the mystery would appear to have something to do with tracking the sources of Dorothy's desire.

In the next scene, Dorothy discovers Jeffrey in the closet and simultaneously humiliates and stimulates him. In this scene, too, when Dorothy calls Jeffrey 'Don', we get a clue that Dorothy's desire is elsewhere. Then Frank enters. Jeffrey's first (and last) view of Frank is from Dorothy's closet and what he sees is no primal scene but a scene shot through with the cultural dynamics of pre-Oedipally fixated male-female relationships. Bundtzen well describes the infantile aggression played out against the mother as Frank calls himself alternately baby and daddy, smacks Dorothy if she looks at him, and puts the blue velvet into his mouth and hers, simulating, as Bundtzen notes, an umbilical cord. But then Bundtzen calls the velvet a fetish, a code word in feminist film criticism which immediately returns the theorist to the Freudian categories that deny dependence on the mother in order to establish male dominance. In the Freudian framework, the fetish stands in for the penis. What happened to the umbilical cord (also a key image in *Eraserhead*)?

For twenty years psychoanalytic theorists have been questioning the phallic interpretation of the fetish, arguing instead that fetishes are used to self-soothe, to replace dependency on an outside source of soothing and nurturance so that the subject does not fragment when the soothing other is absent (in Kohut's terms, a selfobject).²³ While a few critics have noted that Frank has enormous trouble getting it up, it is odd that few have made his impotence central to their interpretation of the film. Frank needs drugs, alcohol, the right atmosphere, a fist, the blue velvet selfobject, and the banning of his

²³ See, for example, Ethel Person and Lionel Ovesey, 'Transvestism: new perspectives', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1978), pp. 301-23.

partner's gaze to be able even briefly to have intercourse ('impersonating male orgasm', as Bundtzen well puts it).²⁴ It is no accident that Frank wants Ben to toast not his health, but his fuck; because, although 'fuck' is every other word out of his mouth, the word represents precisely what he has so much difficulty doing.

Lynch plays hide and seek with revealing the nature and source of Frank's impotence and rage. The key to interpretation, I think, lies in the film's central songs, 'Blue Velvet' and 'In Dreams'. The mystery begins to unravel in the film's climactic scene at Pussy Heaven. Although 'Pussy Heaven' suggests a world of girls, girls, girls, all we actually find at Pussy Heaven are relations between men. The film answers the riddle of how to be a man via such things as beer preferences: Jeffrey likes Heineken, Sandy's father drinks Budweiser, the king of beers, and Frank will allow Jeffrey to drink nothing but Pabst Blue Ribbon. Frank's men continuously circle and gaze at Jeffrey, teasing him and threatening him with a knife; and Frank himself only has eyes for Ben, who later sings him a song of love and loss. Frank's homosexual desire is clearly one of the mysteries that Jeffrey always knew were there but which had remained hidden. Both Frank and Ben 'nurture' Jeffrey with physical violence: Frank proudly tells Ben he can make Jeffrey do whatever he wants.

At Pussy Heaven, Frank holds in his hand another of his fetish/selfobjects, the tape of Roy Orbison's 'In Dreams'. He allows Dorothy to visit her son ('Let tits see her kid'); she lights up, and, with the camera on the closed door, we hear her try to reassure Donny that mummy loves him, which is the perfect introduction to 'In Dreams'. Frank puts on the tape and Ben, 'one suave fucker', lipsyncs. The camera focuses on Frank's face, and we see what we saw through Jeffrey's eyes when Dorothy sang 'Blue Velvet' in the Slow Club: a rapt expression of vulnerable longing. Here, Frank gazes beyond Ben as he gazed beyond Dorothy in the Slow Club: his desire, in both scenes, is for something in the lyrics. In both songs, there is a golden moment, a moment of plenitude in which the singer possesses someone entirely. In 'Blue Velvet', that moment was in the past. In 'In Dreams', the moment is ushered in by a man, the sandman, a good father who gives reassurance that everything is going to be all right. This moment, repeated every night, is a moment when the singer has a nurturant father and is the sole object of his love's desire; but it is a moment that does not last. In the middle of Orbison's song, Frank's look changes to one of disturbance, pain, and then, finally, to rage, at which point he switches off the tape and yells that it is time to go for a joyride. The interpretation of the film, of Lynch's view of male development, hinges on how one interprets that rage; one can only make that interpretation after hearing the song for the second time.

When he clicks off 'In Dreams', unable to tolerate its ending,

Frank begins to yell, 'Let's fuck. I'll fuck anything that moves'. He tries to make his pain disappear by eroticizing it. The next scene, Jeffrey's final rite of initiation into masculinity, reveals the way in which Oedipal and pre-Oedipal damage are interwoven. Frank herds everyone into the car for a ride. At their destination, he uses his inhaler and begins to paw at Dorothy's breasts ('Baby wants to pinch them'). Frank has identified Jeffrey as like him, as having the same psychic structure. Jeffrey tells him not to touch Dorothy and hits him; now Frank's rage is fuelled by jealousy: in a common reversal of Freud's version of the Oedipal story, the father discovers that the son has the power, and becomes violent towards the son (which is in fact the original story of Oedipus, a story in which fathers are not nurturers, but hostile rivals).

Frank has Jeffrey removed from the car and has his men prepare him for the rite to follow. Then Frank smears his own mouth with lipstick, inhales, calls Jeffrey 'pretty, pretty', and kisses him. He asks to have 'Candy Colored Clown' played, and the tape begins. As the song starts, with its father-son bedtime reassurances that everything will be all right, Frank tells Jeffrey he is fucking lucky to be alive. At that moment, he commands Jeffrey to look at him. This is a marked moment because he has so many times become infuriated when Dorothy, and once when Jeffrey, has looked at him. With Jeffrey's gaze on him, he gives Jeffrey the Oedipal lecture: stay away from Dorothy. Frank yells that if Jeffrey doesn't leave her alone, he'll send him a love letter. 'Do you know what a love letter is? It's a bullet from a fucking gun. You receive a love letter from me you're fucked forever.' Then Frank speaks the lines of the song's moment of plenitude to Jeffrey: 'In dreams, I walk with you. In dreams I talk to you. In dreams you're mine, all . . . (he stops). . . . Forèver, in dreams.' Frank then gently wipes the lipstick from Jeffrey's mouth with the blue velvet, for a moment a nurturant father. But as the song turns to the part that Frank had switched off, we finally discover the source of Frank's rage. As the song intones, 'I awake to find you gone', Frank turns violent. He tells Jeffrey to feel his muscles and asks if he likes it, marking the shift from nurturant to phallic masculinity (and reminding the viewer of the sexual scene when Dorothy asked him if he liked the feel of her breast). At this point Orbison sings, 'Just before the dawn I awake and find you gone. I can't help it, I can't help it if I cry.' Frank asks his men to hold Jeffrey tight for him, and he begins to beat him as the song, at higher volume, wails, 'It only happens in dreams. Only in dreams.'

Thus, the pain Frank expresses in the scene at Pussy Heaven is explained when we hear the end of the song: it is the pain of abandonment, loss, powerlessness, dependency. This pain evokes Frank's rage, which is highly eroticized. Frank's desire, both heterosexual and homosexual, is inextricably fused with pre-Oedipal

25 For a discussion of the violence and shaming rituals evoked by male-male desire in film, see Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983), pp. 2-16. See also Kaleta, *David Lynch*, who argues that homosexual desire evokes Frank's disturbance and rage in this scene and the one with Ben (pp. 124-5).

rage and violence, which are aroused at the moment he feels abandoned by *both* a male and female intimate.²⁵ In both Freudian theory and in Frank's psychology, dependency is eroticized, and the rage it engenders eliminates female agency and male nurturance, while celebrating a (missing) phallic power; this is one aspect of what we have come erroneously to call the Oedipal. Stuck in the moment of narcissistic rage, Frank fragments and displays the gender, age (baby/daddy), and identity indeterminacies characteristic of self-disorder (a warning against the facile celebrations of indeterminacy that we find in some postmodern theories and theories of the pre-Oedipal). Phallic law rests not on a denial of fragmentation or castration but on a denial of dependency and loss, a denial of female agency and desire for a nurturant father: more specifically, it rests on a refusal to mourn early losses and parental disappointments. Thus are the failures of the Oedipal incomprehensible without understanding the failures of the pre-Oedipal: the way the Oedipal script plays out bears the marks not only of loss, as Lacan suggests, but of rage at dependency and abandonment, split off and projected onto the female although experienced in relation to both father and mother.

This is male trouble. After Jeffrey is beaten senseless by Frank, a candle glows, a hellish sound returns, the screen fades to black, and Jeffrey wakes, a man. Lynch, master of sound, immediately provides his association to what it means to be a man. Jeffrey wakes to a sound, then a sight, of hoses, the very sound/image that in the opening scene had accompanied his father's collapse into impotence. Dorothy is punished and figured as the abandoner, but the film's other secret is father abandonment, which Lynch reveals ragefully not just by making the fathers absent, but by making them impotent or evil.

When Jeffrey wakes up he knows all he needs to know about the mysteries of masculinity. He sits on his bed thinking. He sees Dorothy's mouth saying 'Hit me'. He cries. He sees himself hit her. He cries more. Then he sees an image of Donny's hat. He cries even more. He pictures the closed door at Pussy Heaven and hears Dorothy say, 'No, no Donny, mummy loves you': her attempt to reassure her son that she has not abandoned him. He sees himself hitting her again, and his crying continues. Why is Jeffrey crying? What, according to Lynch, do men want? It seems to me that both Frank and Jeffrey want to be Dorothy's baby. Dorothy's voice off in Pussy Heaven does not establish the power of the mother (which is Bundtzen's argument); the film, like the culture of which it is a part, like Freudian theory, denies this possibility. Rather, the offscene reunion of mother and son establishes the power of the son – he who is reassured that he has the mother's desire (indeed, Dorothy's husband is mysteriously absent in this scene). What is denied in this slippage from mother to son is female agency, that one depends on

a female whose desire is not just for the son, but is also elsewhere.

Donny's power is established via the recurring image of his hat, which, in Jeffrey's visual imagination, seems to evoke Jeffrey's sense of his own innocence before his detective work reveals to him the darker impulses of this vision of masculinity. Jeffrey is seen playing with the hat in the scene immediately following the one in which he hits Dorothy. After he hits her, they make love, and we hear animal sounds reminiscent of the sounds in *Elephant Man* that accompany the mother's rape by elephants. The sight and sound of hellfire recurs, the screen fades to black, and we next hear Dorothy say: 'I have your disease in me'. Then we hear child's music and see Jeffrey playing with the hat. When Dorothy hears the musical hat, she runs down the hall and quickly grabs it, holding it to her like a sacred object. She says: 'He used to make me laugh' (something we never see Dorothy do). In Lynch's world of dichotomies, of naivete and innocence vs sickness and horror, the male adult and his sexuality are diseased, and the child holds the power. At some point abandoned by mummy and daddy (if not actually abused by them, as in his other films – even here, Dorothy pushes him and hits him first), the trajectory of manhood shifts from innocence and power to degradation and impotence. Whether a result of parental abuse or of unmoored inevitable parental failures, Lynch dramatizes a narcissistic solution to narcissistic blows.

Jeffrey comes downstairs to breakfast, and when his aunt asks about his bruises, tells her he does not want to talk about it and, lightly, says that if she keeps asking she's going to get it. Masculinity is now inextricably linked with the threat of violence (and distinguished clearly from femininity – Aunt Barbara suggests that Jeffrey should talk about his problems, that marriages are saved by talking. Jeffrey has stopped talking. He no longer confides his knowledge to Sandy, protecting her from his harsh insights into the world and masculinity, making of her an object to his subject).

Jeffrey wants to turn the case over to the town fathers now, and bond with Sandy at the hop. But the town fathers are impotent, and Jeffrey is not allowed to escape the consequences of masculinity so easily: in the film's Oedipal moment, he has to kill Frank and repudiate a now not-so-sexy Dorothy. In the final scenes, however, the alternatives for Oedipal manhood become clear. With Frank gone, we return via Jeffrey's ear to the world of family life in the suburbs. Jeffrey's dad is fine, and he and Detective Williams, garden tool in hand, chatter on the lawn, while the 'girls' are inside either gossiping over tea or cooking. The robins have come, and even if the robin has a worm in its mouth, the music and everything else suggest that Jeffrey has joined the world of Sandy's dream, the world of the impotent fathers.

In these closing moments the too vibrant, too peaceful images of the opening, with the music of love and reconciliation, are repeated;

but this time they end with Dorothy smiling at her son in the park. Wearing his trademark hat of innocence and power, Donny runs to her in slow motion and she happily holds him. She then looks off in the distance and hears herself sing the final line of 'Blue Velvet': 'And I still can see blue velvet through my tears' (in the opening rendition by Bobby Vinton, the line had been cut off, keeping the pain in the song hidden until we first see it on Frank's face). Perhaps Dorothy is the only figure allowed to be in touch with both the world of innocence and the world of horror at the end. But the very splitting of the world in this way is a problem bound up with the psychology of the film.

Where I depart from Bundtzen is in her suggestion that Lynch finally allows Dorothy her desire. Although it could be argued that before she was violated by Frank, Dorothy must have had the kind of agency that allowed her not only to be a mother and wife but also a sexy singer in a nightclub, it was the sexy singing that led to the loss of her agency. The film's ending evokes Freud's own deconstruction of his Oedipal theory, the poignant moment of his essay, 'Femininity', where he sadly acknowledges that the Oedipal promise to the male actually does not quite work out: for while the adult male's desire is for his wife, her desire is for the penis, incarnated in her male child.²⁶ But this piece of theorizing, too, is a male fantasy: *the* pre-Oedipal male fantasy, which imagines a lost moment of plenitude in order to avoid acknowledging the child's dependency on a powerful female whose subjectivity cannot be reduced to the maternal. Dorothy, before Frank, was precisely the female subject that the dependent child/pre-Oedipal adult cannot tolerate. On Lynch's screen, however, the powerless, helpless Dorothy – Dorothy after Frank – predominates. The film must be read as incarnating rage against her agency, not against her lack.

Thus, the masculine dichotomy drawn by Lynch is either rage and impotence or blandness and impotence, a vision that has certain resonances with the Reagan–Bush years, when bland smiles and homilies hid rageful acts of violence. In Lynch's films, these may be represented by different characters, as in *Blue Velvet*, or by the same character, such as Laura Palmer's father, Leland, in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. Jeffrey's insight into masculinity is precisely a vision of Leland Palmer, good bourgeois father on the surface, raging abuser beneath.

Where does the psychology of *Blue Velvet* meet the political reality of contemporary USA? I shall conclude by taking up the challenge posed by Jane Shattuc, the challenge for feminist theorists to begin to map the patriarchal dominant of our time. Shattuc is disturbed by the moral ambiguity in Lynch's work, which does not allow the viewer to make ethical determinations about the unprecedented level of violence against women in films such as *Blue Velvet* and

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 134: 'How often it happens, however, that it is only his son who obtains what he himself aspired to! One gets an impression that a man's love and a woman's are a phase apart psychologically.'

27 Shattuc, 'Postmodern misogyny', p. 78. Further, Shattuc notes how a scene of Frank crying is succeeded by a battle for male dominance, but she does not explore the link between the two scenes (p. 81).

Twin Peaks. I agree with her that Freudian categories do not help to understand this rage. Discussing the mix of historical periods in the film, Shattuc writes:

Blue Velvet extends this blurring of history to an image of generalized masculine rage which has no source. Why does Frank brutalize women? Frank's obsession appears to originate from a fragmented and contradictory Freudian problem – a drug-induced Oedipal fixation – that ultimately makes no sense.²⁷

As I have argued, Lynch's world does make psychological sense in the split world of pathological pre-Oedipal dynamics. The fact that Frank's narcissistic rage has become a staple of contemporary mainstream and avant-garde filmmaking suggests that these dynamics operate on the cultural as well as on the individual level.

US independent filmmaker Abel Ferrara's latest film within a film, *Dangerous Game* (1993), provides an interesting example of this phenomenon, because Ferrara does not hide what I have called the secret of male dependence and rage at female agency. For much of the film, we watch director Harvey Keitel try to get his male protagonist, James Russo, in touch with feelings of abandonment provoked by his wife's (Madonna) turn from him. Keitel tries to get Russo to show more pain, a pain that is the director's own, but what the audience largely sees is the violent abuse Russo plays out towards his wife as he gets in touch with that pain. While Keitel assures Madonna that her character has power, the power of her new spirituality, he directs her to submit to Russo's violence. Only at the point at which Russo threatens to kill her is she to try to stop him: which she does – ineffectually – by questioning his manliness. Ferrara hides few of his film techniques and clearly means for us to see filmmaking as the dangerous game, violent towards its actors, its audience, even towards the emotional life of the director. Nonetheless, what we see for much of the film is continuous and escalating violence towards the woman, a violence that the film implies is real, not just acted.

Shattuc challenges us to understand what this filmic rage at women tells us about contemporary gender relations. I have argued that Lynch presents a particular vision of male development, in which a powerful child, innocent and in full possession of the mother's desire, grows to bland impotence and/or rageful impotence. The secrets in the film are male dependence, female agency, the desire for a nurturant father. But another secret that remains hidden in *Blue Velvet* and in writings about it is the secret of recent history: Shattuc writes that none of the eighteen reviews of the film she read 'sought to explain the film's central sadomasochistic relationship between Dorothy and Frank in the context of contemporary sociopolitical circumstances'.²⁸ Lynch mixes images of the 1950s with images of the 1980s, one of the main attributes that impel critics to

28 Ibid., pp. 77–8.

call his work postmodern (by which they seem to mean 'confusing'). But a possible political interpretation arises from the fact that the 1950s and the 1980s mark the period of development of our real hero, David Lynch. *Blue Velvet* is thus a historicized parable of male development.

Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* is an attempt to understand how the patterns of childrearing in the 1950s led to a situation in which heterosexual men and women, by virtue of their self structure, could not fulfil each other's needs. Her story, located in suburban, middle-class USA, where Jeffrey Beaumont's story also takes place, features overinvolved mothers deprived of outlets for their desire other than their children, and largely absent fathers. The psychological consequences of pre-Oedipal development are different for the male and the female children of these families. Drawing on the work of Robert Stoller, Chodorow argues that because the primary caretaker of boys and girls is a woman, a woman becomes the first object of identification. Nurture, caretaking, emotion, dependence all become associated with females. Father absence prevents the boy from identifying with these attributes in a like other, which, as I have argued, leads to an Oedipal theory and reality that centres on competition and hostility rather than connection and care. The road to male gender identification involves disidentifying not only with the mother but with everything that has been associated with her. This, Chodorow argues, is the characteristic psychic constellation of the heterosexual middle-class white male who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Emmanuel Kaftal adds that the lack of a nurturant pre-Oedipal father, the projection of dependency and nurture onto the female, lead to misogynistic envy of women, rivalry and hostility towards men, and to driven, repeated enactments of (failed) separation via acts that require heroic isolation.²⁹ Thus, the psychic constellation involves a lack of fathering and the eroticization of dependency needs, as well as the expectation that mother has no other interest but her children. The pain caused by the absence of a nurturant father (the Sandman) is disavowed, and mother is blamed for all wounds.

As Fredric Jameson has noted, what is absent from nostalgia films like *Blue Velvet* is the 1960s (and, I would add, the 1970s).³⁰ What happened during the 1960s and 1970s that was so threatening to masculinity that the decades have become a secret? I would suggest that films such as *Blue Velvet* simultaneously reveal and hide the secret of white heterosexual masculinity in crisis. The crises come from many sources: they stir up the vulnerability, emotionality and dependency that phallic masculinity wishes away; the consequence is helpless rage. One such crisis was the women's movement, which has made it hard to continue to fantasize that a woman's desire is only for husband and child. Woman's desire is equally likely to be

²⁹ See Emmanuel Kaftal, 'On intimacy between men', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1991), pp. 305–34. On a lighter note, Ann Murphy suggests that if women were writing the Psychiatric Diagnostic Manual, they would add a male disorder titled something like 'Excessive Autonomy Syndrome' (personal correspondence).

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, 'Nostalgia for the present', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 2 (1989), pp. 517–37.

elsewhere, in a career, in a woman's group, in other autonomous pursuits.

A second 'crisis' is the challenge to the dominance of heterosexuality by the gay and lesbian movement. Thus homosexual desire makes its appearance on screen, but also evokes rage and violence. Third is the challenge to the dominance of whiteness, first by the civil rights movement, then by Vietnam and other 'Third World' liberation struggles, and now by the demands of multiculturalism. While the only nonwhite actors in *Blue Velvet* are somewhat peripheral to the plot (Jeffrey's father's black employees, who clearly know how to run the store without help from the white master), one astute critic points out that one of Lynch's many dichotomies is the contrast between 'a blond, apple-pie-American sweetheart' and 'a dark, sick, European-accented one'.³¹ The rage against the dark European might also reflect a fourth crisis, the decline of the USA as an economic power and the rise of countries like Germany, with the threat of a united Europe. The threat of a dependent USA unites symbolically with the threat of the displaced, dependent male to suggest that the current rage against women is historically, as well as psychologically, motivated.

There are many other variables contributing to the increased visibility of fractures in the fantasy of phallic wholeness. The economics of the 1980s interrupted the fantasy of male classlessness. In good economic times, men can bond as men and deny class differences. In bad times, when the rift between poor and rich becomes more palpable, lower-class and displaced middle-class males lose a group identity that gives them a sense of phallic power: they are all thereby made painfully aware of their place.

If the postmodern has something to do with threats to white heterosexual male hegemony, then perhaps the level of violence against women we see (not only on the screen but also in real life) is a reaction to postmodernity (in Massachusetts, a woman is killed by a partner or ex-partner about every nine days. Often, as in the scenario of *Dangerous Game*, these murders occur at the moment a chronically abused woman abandons the abuser. This has provided the clue to those who study domestic violence that male dependency is the underside of these displays of male violent power.³²). In stirring up male trouble, these crises put men in the position of both abuser and abused, and evoke the defences of the fragmenting self: splitting, projection, insecure attachment and immense sensitivity to abandonment, and narcissistic rage against anything perceived as a less powerful other. Such rage is not the manifestation of an aggressive drive, but the response by narcissistically vulnerable psyches to perceived threats to security.³³

Lynch's film enacts pre-Oedipal defences on the level of both content and form. Karen Jaehne, looking at the psychology of *Blue Velvet*, calls Frank and his men 'sadosomochists teetering between

31 Simon, 'Neat trick', p. 56.

32 See, for example, Virginia Goldner, 'Toward a critical relational theory of gender', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1991), pp. 249–76.

33 Stephen Mitchell, a prominent psychoanalyst of the relational school, reinterprets aggression in his most recent book, and concludes, 'If there is aggression, there is, by definition, threat'. *Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 166.

childhood and manhood'. Criticizing Lynch as a binary thinker, she writes:

What *Blue Velvet* effectively does is to scare us into a panic or cynicism over lost ideals. It should not make us think that the only alternative to naivete is humiliation into abuse, with the only solace the sound of a Sixties' song. Innocence is not lost; it is transformed. American dreams encounter their greatest challenge not in preserving innocence, but rather in maturing – an observation beyond Lynch at this point.³⁴

34 Jaehne, 'Blue Velvet', p. 40.

One might include in this indictment most US cultural production and much US politics. Indeed, John Powers makes what I consider the same point as that Jaehne raised to the political level, when he argues that Lynch scares us into sticking to the safe side of lobotomized *bourgeoisement* by picturing the only alternative as horrific. Powers speaks of a breed of films he calls the New American Gothic, films that challenge the bland pap of most Hollywood offerings that 'flicker across the screen with the practiced, comforting banality of a presidential smile'. He says of Lynch's film:

Such a dichotomy is typical. All the New American Gothic movies share a taste for extremes, but when it comes time to show anything in between, the credits begin to roll. *Blue Velvet* finds no mid-range of experience between Jeffrey's daylight world and Frank's murderous 'love letters' in the dark. . . . In fact, these films exude the Manichaeian, middle-class paranoia that infects countless recent movies . . . all of which imply that once you leave bourgeois life, you're immediately prey to crime, madness, squalor, poverty.

Now it would be wrong to criticize *Blue Velvet* and the others for not dramatizing the excluded middle, for not finding alternatives to the extremes of good and evil that give them their spark. Literary gothic is distinguished by similar stylization; it goes with the territory. Nevertheless, one suspects that these films don't dramatize alternatives because they can't imagine alternatives.³⁵

35 Powers, 'Bleak chic', p. 51.

Perhaps the patriarchal dominant is the psychology and politics of this split world, a world with no alternatives to black-and-white thinking because so much vulnerability is kept secret. As anxiety heightens, splitting intensifies. Lynch's psychology of male development mirrors the US's fantasy that it has fallen from a fifties innocence into a nineties violent nightmare. Such a fantasy results in political 'solutions' like the Gulf War, solutions that are as dangerous and aggressive as the kind of personal solutions Lynch shows.

A look at the imagery of contemporary male popular culture

suggests that those of Jeffrey Beaumont's generation do not feel overly mothered but rather feel either abused or abandoned by both their parents and by cultural authority figures. Lynch's films capture this psychological reality as well (for example, neither of Jeffrey's parents is involved with him and Donny is abandoned). These films suggest, however, that if we fail to mourn our losses on both the individual and the political level, we repeatedly enact narcissistic relations and solutions. The narcissistic nightmare in Lynch's parable of male development – the wish to dominate an omnipotent/impotent mother and merge with an omnipotent/impotent father – is symptomatic of an inability to mourn the losses of narcissistic blows. Lynch's alternative, equally narcissistic and disingenuous (and thoroughly American), is to claim the position of an innocent baby.

Lynch's films, focused so heavily on trauma and abuse, enact the dynamics of splitting on the level of both form and content. These dynamics, I would argue, are central to mapping a patriarchal dominant. The anxiety that Lynch is such a master at generating with images and sounds very much reflects the heightened anxieties experienced by many men at this historical moment. It is in part an anxiety about gender identity and gender roles, about threats to the traditional ways, that attributes such as dependency and autonomy have been split between the genders. Lynch captures the essence of the Reagan–Bush years in his vision of a world of robins and love facing off against a world that rages against female agency and violent or ineffective male authorities.

Blue Velvet, a parable of male development for our time, sheds light on some of the problems of contemporary feminist film criticism, particularly as the latter turns its attention to male trouble. Just as Freudian categories cannot explain the dynamics of *Blue Velvet* and other films that feature the interplay of impotence and rage, so they are inadequate to an understanding of male trouble. The Freudian Oedipal/pre-Oedipal is an instance of splitting that mirrors the kind of splits we see in Lynch's world, and it is hard to go beyond these splits if we remain in a Freudian framework. If aggression is a drive rather than a response to a threat to an endangered sense of self, if castration anxiety is bedrock, it is hard adequately to historicize increased violence against women. As Mary Ann Doane indicates in her book, *The Desire to Desire*, the danger of using Freudian and Lacanian categories to interpret gender relations in film is that film theory and psychoanalytic theory are built from the same phallic categories.³⁶ Freudian theory and feminist film criticism too often have kept the secret of male dependence and female agency by focusing their energy on such categories as originary fragmentation, castrated women, Oedipal dynamics, merger with the screen, and so on. Whether castrating or phallicizing the mother, the developmental theory offered not only by Lynch, but also by Freud and Lacan, describes and enacts a

³⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

moment in the development not of men, but of narcissistic men. In order to understand the contemporary psychic and social worlds, different categories – those of self disorders, trauma and pre-Oedipal pathology – are necessary.

reports

Créteil International Women's Film Festival, 18-27 March 1994

Whilst the channel tunnel suffers endless delays and Euro-Disney counts its losses, for the 16th International Women's Film Festival in Créteil, life goes on. The first aid which resuscitated the 1994 festival was performed largely by Jackie Buet (founder of the festival) and her co-workers; however, survival is always a matter of change and compromise. If it is the task of a reviewer to identify the politics and directions of a festival, what, then, is the focus of Créteil? The overall impact, in a post-Disney, pre-Chunnel Parisian suburb, seems to be of a festival which opens up spaces (for meetings, connections, juxtaposition or contradiction). But whilst these spaces can be planned, what eventually fills them is less easily controlled.

Looking for some sign of the festival organizers' intentions, one is struck by the contradictory messages which Créteil gives off. The programming mould, which in the past has figured 'auteur' features as the most acceptable form of women's cinema, was more strongly challenged this year, with several of the entries in the fiction film competition having an independent/avant-garde feel. Equally, the fiction bias of the festival was challenged by a dominant documentary presence, with a homage given to French television documentarist, Mircille Dumas, twelve documentaries in competition compared to only ten fictions, and with several of the short films using documentary forms (including *Cancer in Two Voices* [Lucy Massie Phenix, USA, 1993] winner of the public prize for best non-French short film).

Although the shift from centre stage of bankable auteur cinema suggests a move away from the commercial space which Créteil previously had to create in order to

survive, certain concessions were evident in this year's programming. The appearance of Catherine Deneuve to present her 'autoportrait' was a coup of the type which the festival has been trying to organize since its early beginnings. Strategically placed right in the middle of the festival's ten day duration, Deneuve's 'appearance' turned out to be an hour-long interview following a screening of *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (Jacques Demy, 1967). Both the packed auditorium and the presence of what seemed like most of the French press testified to the public interest in Deneuve. This was in general a public that would not normally have attended the festival, and the incongruity of Deneuve's celebrity presence at Créteil was highlighted by her position, only a few months later, as Vice President of the Cannes Film Festival.

While new audiences were attracted through Deneuve's appearance, controversy was created among many of the festival's loyal followers by this year's postcard, sent out some months before the festival. Featuring a photograph (by Karine Saporta) of a naked woman in a typically objectified position, it raised protests and threats of boycott. During the festival itself, the postcard's objectifying image was replaced by the poster's portrait of a woman's head and shoulders framed in a camera lens and surrounded by rich red velvet. The sumptuousness of this new image could well have been intended to echo the festival venue, which had this year undergone a facelift and was all pink neon lights and dark glass. Of more significance when thinking about this year's festival, though, was the architecture of Créteil itself. The eclectic curves of the pseudo-village which surrounds the Maison des Arts channeled this reviewer's perceptions, creating the festival as a knowing, postmodern pastiche, with various levels of play, re-vision and ironic appropriation in operation.

A prime candidate for the above category

is the film *Cling Film* (Anna Thew, UK, 1993) which explores changing sexuality in the time of AIDS through images which mock and rework. Rubber, condoms and erect penises dominate in a film which polices the border between pornography and common sense. Rubber is given various connotations, as sadomasochistic lesbian porn with tight black latex meets the awkward, flurried hunt for a condom. The old theme of the dangers of sex is illustrated by clips of Nosferatu, the phallic vampire, arousing women's desire in the 1920s. The femme fatale is back as a tattooed tough cookie, intimidating her wimpy male bed partner who flees to a dark corner at the sight of a small piece of rubber. Whilst the soundtrack is dominated by the noises of torn and twisted rubber, the image track slowly transforms the awkwardness of the noise into a sensual accompaniment for new sexual games.

The fragmentation of the sexual act undertaken by *Cling Film* is complemented by two fiction films from the competition, which use fragmented narratives in order to convey either a counterworld to the mainstream – *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, USA, 1993–4) – or a world which is, in fact, in pieces – *Fresh Kill* (Shu Lea Cheang, USA, 1994). In *Fresh Kill* postmodernity merges with 'women's' issues in a narrative which develops in associative loops. Green rays, in the best B-movie tradition, are the indicators of a massive nuclear poisoning, endangering the population of Staten Island, New York. One of the narrative strands focuses on an extended family headed by a native American chief (who seems to have stepped straight out of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* [Milos Forman, 1975]). The chief's daughter (a lesbian mother) is the lover of *la belle* Sarita Choudhury, whose closest friend, an oriental Adonis, is by night turned on by communal bathtub sessions, and by day hacks into mega-magnates' computer banks. The postmodern image bank is mined – half

of the protagonists earn their keep in a yuppie Japanese Sushi bar, where stylish bankers talk elusive shop.

In *Go Fish* the transparency of classical narrative is rejected, and replaced by an oral history and a more communal form. Women get together and decide upon what to tell and how to shape the central love story of Max and Ely. The plot thus created is one of girl-meets-girl, where heterosexual romantic stereotypes are ridiculed, yet still accepted as emotional necessities. The world of *Go Fish* is a wholly lesbian-defined one of gay bookshops and bars, university classes concerned with 'outing' famous women, and two communal apartments. When one of the community sleeps with a man, she is confronted in a timeless no-woman's land, a black, geographically dislocated hole, as if to suggest that, in fact, there is no life outside of the community. While *Fresh Kill* seems to have been made for the 1990s 'zapper' viewing mentality, *Go Fish* is more accessible, rewarding with a witty and engaging reflection upon what it means to be a lesbian in the 1990s.

More conventional Crêteil choices for long features were provided in the form of *Grande petite/Large Small* (Sophie Fillières, France, 1994), and *Le Sexe des étoiles/The Sex of the Stars* (Paule Baillargeon, Canada, 1993). *Grande petite* follows the current glut of girl-with-a-gun movies. Bénédicte (Judith Godrèche), a Kieslowskiesque heroine (dark bobbed hair and mysterious, brooding manner), discovers a bag containing a gun and some money. Whilst for the tortured male hero these two items might have prompted a suicidal road movie, in this case they serve only to accentuate Bénédicte's inaction. In the end, she plants both items in the path of another unsuspecting young girl and, so it is implied, the narrative begins again.

An original variation on the father-daughter relationship, *Le Sexe des étoiles* follows the return of a transsexual father to

his wife and teenage daughter. Whilst the scenario seems fantastic, it is explored in its fullest consequences. Camille the tomboy daughter, an aspiring stargazer, expects her 'father' to assume a kind of hermaphroditic supermother role. Through the course of the film, she must learn to pull her head literally out of the clouds, to see beyond appearances to realities (for example, her father's transvestism is not simply a costume to be taken off and put on again), and to accept her own sexuality.

Unconventional and intriguing, *Le Sexe des étoiles* was the public's favourite, winning the prize for best long fiction film. The jury's choice of a winner in this category could not have been more different. *You Seng* (Clara Law, Hong Kong, 1993) (whose *Lune d'automne* was in competition in 1993), best described as a historic epic, is set in 626 AD and follows the fortunes of one General Shi. Like last year's winner, *Tala! Det Ar Sa Morkt/Speak, It's Getting Dark* (Suzanne Osten, Sweden, 1992), *You Seng* has a man as its central character. Yet unlike Osten's subtle exploration of power and prejudice, Law's film suffers from a lack of pace and direction which caused many spectators to walk out of the film well before its end.

Dancing took centre stage in last year's Karine Saporta selection, and many of this year's documentaries use dance as a formal means to explore pains that remain unspeakable. As well as Pratibha Parmar's and Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks* (Britain, 1993), the short films *Speak It!* (Sylvia Hamilton, Canada, 1993) (about a school discovering the racism of American history) and *And Still I Rise* (Ngozi Onwurah, UK, 1993) (a montage of thoughts on colonial representations of the black woman) both use artistic body-expression to speak about racism or slavery. On a lighter note, the public prize for the best French short film went to *Les Toiletttes de Belle-Ville* (Eléonore Faucher, 1993) in which a group of young blacks creates a musical/generic extravaganza

for a cleaning woman in some 'Belle-Ville' toilets.

Two of the most memorable documentaries were *Dream Girls* (Kim Longinotto and Jane Williams, UK, 1993), winner of the jury prize for best documentary, and *Habehira Vehagorai/Choice and Destiny* (Tsipi Reibenbach, Israel, 1993). *Dream Girls* is a study of the Takarazuka school in Japan which, curiously, combines lessons in operatic performance (during which the students are groomed to assume either the butch or the femme roles) with strict discipline and household tasks, designed seemingly to create the perfect wife. A paradoxical image of gender in Japanese society emerges through this study which, after introducing its subject, leaves many questions unanswered and mysteries intact.

By contrast, *Choice and Destiny* is explicitly probing and provocative. Setting out to make a documentary based upon her parents' recollections of the holocaust, Tsipi encounters one big problem: her mother refuses to talk. Instead of her conceived documentary, then, *Choice and Destiny* records the daily lives of her parents, through which each manages to repress the horrors of their experiences. The film becomes a powerful meditation on time passing and time past, with the recorded rituals, meals, cooking and housework standing in for that which cannot be shown.

Whilst *Choice and Destiny* acknowledges that some experiences simply cannot be recreated for the cinema, the winner of the public prize, the Canadian documentary *Lesbian Lives* (Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie, 1992) suggests that they can at least be retold as oral histories. In this film, five Canadian women tell of their experiences as out-and-about-town butch or femme lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s: the gay bars, the cruising, the relationships, insecurities and strengths. These interviews are framed by lesbian dime novels, from which frozen images are narrativized. The narratives

recreate the hilarious stereotype of the lesbian femme fatale luring her young and innocent prey into the dark recesses of sin. However, these women do not receive their conventional narrative punishment – death for the brown-haired butch and a heterosexual coupling for the blonde femme: instead their story ends with an embrace.

Alongside the selection of current work, two sections were programmed featuring women's place in past and future history. The 'Pionnières d'hiers et d'aujourd'hui' ('Pioneers of yesterday and today') coupled early silent films with examples of computer-animated new technologies. Whilst both sections brought new works to the festival, they suffered from poor documentation in the catalogue and, in the case of the silent films, awkward screening times.

Amongst all the competitions, gala evenings, conferences and discussions, it is easy to misplace the fundamental pleasure offered by a festival: the opportunity to watch otherwise unexhibited or unavailable films. One little jewel to be extracted from Créteil's wealth of screenings was a film by Hungarian Ildiko Szabo: *Gyerekgyilkosságok/Child Murderers* (1993), shown for the young jury. The film tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy's tragic journey through childhood. Through an old grandmother who dreams of her days as an actress, a spiteful neighbour, and a pregnant gypsy whom he comes to love, the boy experiences the mysteries of womanhood. The reworking of the childhood theme, lovingly filmed in a nostalgic, grainy black and white, went unrewarded by the young jury, who chose *Mi Vida Loca* (USA, 1993), a hip 'girls in the 'hood' tale by Allison Anders. However, this film should be prized as an example of the space which Créteil quite unexpectedly offers for engagement on a very personal, individual scale. Smaller than Cannes, larger than the Norwich Weekend Festival of Women Filmmakers, Créteil offers a space in

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After relatively modest beginnings in the mid sixties at Cambridge University, the International Animation Festival was revived in 1979 and has been run ever since as a biennial event. Moving from Cambridge to Bristol and finally to Cardiff over the last ten years, the Festival has never been site-specific in name, unlike most other film festivals which almost always include the host city in their titles. It is truly international in flavour, remaining unblemished by the chauvinistic subtexts that can mar competitive film festivals elsewhere. Nonetheless, with its second run in Cardiff, the Festival has demonstrated a laudable commitment to showcasing local talent in Wales and the west of England which was

reflected in a retrospective of work done at Chapter Animation Workshop/Filmworks. Mixed in with the rest of Festival, an impressive range of Welsh and West Country based animation was prominently displayed, ranging from the refreshingly abrasive social satire of Phil Mulloy's *The Sound of Music* (1993), to the worthy operatic interpretations of S4C's *Operavox* (1994) series.

This Festival was the first to be directed by Jayne Pilling, formerly Deputy Head of Distribution and Exhibition at the British Film Institute, taking over from respected outgoing director, Irene Kotlarz. Pilling is renowned throughout the industry for her exceptional talent as a programmer and her commitment to the medium, and this Festival reflected her good judgement and intimate knowledge of animation. This was manifested in a solid balance between populist packages, such as the 'Adults only!' showcase of 'mature' films, and outright avant-garde programmes like the three entitled 'Breaking the Rules' which featured aesthetically and technically challenging work, often congruent with current debates in radical feminism.

Whether by accident or design, the programming repeatedly threw up thought-provoking resonances and echoes. The aforementioned *Operavox* programme was complemented by a witty programme of spoof operas and the striking films in the *Opera Imaginaire* series produced by the Arts Council. Winsor McCay's groundbreaking *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918) was shown twice to illuminating effect: first in an instructive talk by John Canemaker and later in a strong programme featuring animated propaganda films from around the world. A retrospective of the work of Ladislav Starewicz, one of the great pioneers of 3-D animation, was counterpointed by the British premiere of one of the latest 3-D animated features *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) on the opening night of the Festival. If only Jan Svankmajer's *Faust* (1994), which was premiering at Cannes the same week,

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Throughout the Festival, the interaction between animation and other forms of artistic production was a recurrent concern, one that permeated all the events on offer, including screenings, debates, lectures and exhibitions, not to mention the more *ad hoc* debates in the Chapter Arts Centre Bar. It was striking how eager most delegates were to engage in formulating a more theoretical understanding of the nature of their medium, despite the fact that they were participating in a film festival rather than an academic conference. This introspective tone was partly set by the inclusion of several lectures given at last year's Society for Animation Studies Conference: Robin Allen on Disney's European influences, William Moritz on Bartosch, and Simon Pummell on Francis Bacon and Disney all opened up in different ways the problematic relationship between animation and the traditional graphic arts. Pummell's own films, which were given a welcome retrospective, also question the relationship between medium, presenting complex meditations on sexuality, eroticism and the body. The exquisite work of Lejf Marcussen, which was also retrospectively, neatly dovetailed with these debates. Little known in this country, Marcussen's work plays with ideas of perception and progression, and experiments innovatively with sound. Ironically, even though it contained films from both Pummell and Marcussen, the programme entitled 'Art and animation' was one of the least interesting compilations, containing as it did too many literal interpretations of famous art works.

Meanwhile, one of the more revealing debates on the subject took place during the seminar on 'Getting the knowledge: forum on education and training'. As with the other seminars at the Festival, the debate (sponsored by the European Union body CARTOON) did not arrive at any firm resolutions but rather served to illustrate the

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Perhaps the most powerful integrating force at the Festival was the presence of Jules Engel whose career forms a near microcosm of the history of animation. Although beneath the jolly surface the industry is still largely divided between producers of mainstream entertainment and those with grander aesthetic programmes, Engel is one of the few who has had a foot in every camp. After working for Disney in the 1930s and then helping to found UPA studios, he returned to painting and abstract film in the 1960s. Eventually, he helped to create the Department of Experimental Animation at the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts) where he trained many of the most prominent animation artists in the field. The Festival celebrated his lifework by mounting a retrospective of many of his own films as well as programming screenings of UPA films, and films by notable alumni of CalArts' Experimental Animation department, which happened to include Henry Selick, the director of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Thus, as was so often the

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reviews

review article:

Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993, 271pp.

Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*. London: UCL Press, 1993, 292pp.

Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993, 195pp.

LEE GRIEVESON

¹ Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983), pp. 2–16.

Steve Neale's essay 'Masculinity as spectacle'¹ is published as prologue and 'historical referent' to the Cohan and Hark collection. In many ways it figures as historical referent more generally, establishing a nexus of concerns around masculinity, issues of spectacle, star image, genre, sadism/masochism, and so on that play out across the three texts reviewed here.

Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* suggests a shift in Neale's original schema that is seemingly predicated both on an historical argument – that, in the 1980s, 'the male body on the screen was becoming more and more visible' (p. 1) alongside a series of shifts in the formal operations of Hollywood cinema (p. 57) – and a shift within feminist theory in the theorizations of sexuality and spectatorship, primarily here in the utilization of conceptions of masquerade and performativity. This increasing visibility of masculinity emerges for Tasker from a 'cultural context in which the multiple meanings of masculine identity, the existence of masculinities, has been made increasingly apparent'. (p. 1) This context is approached in Tasker via a (too) loosely delineated configuration of postmodernity, a configuration that for Tasker instigates a problematization of masculinity in a

dissociation of it from production and its positioning then in the realm of consumption. (p. 130) Tasker's reading of the bodybuilder as star is central here: the built male body 'as self created and as produced for display'. (p. 105) Tasker suggests that in the action cinema more generally 'visual display is elevated to a defining feature' (p. 6), becoming then increasingly dissociated from the system of narrativity that Neale's analysis was directed at. For Tasker, this dissociation is productive of a splitting of masculinity, so that the built male star functions as 'a parodic performance of "masculinity", which both enacts and calls into question the qualities they embody'. (p. 111)

There are a couple of points worth pursuing here in relation to Neale's original schema. Firstly, Tasker's consideration of masculinity as simulacrum is explicitly drawing upon recent work on masquerade and performativity – what Judith Butler elsewhere characterizes as 'a critical reflection on gender ontology as parodic (de)construction'.² Masculinity as performative discourse is then generalized outwards: as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recently remarked, 'masculinity does not equal "about men"'.³ In this way, Tasker introduces the term 'muscularity' to drive a wedge between 'masculinity' and 'men'. Her consideration, in two chapters, of recent movies which place women at the centre of the action narrative suggests that 'these films reinscribe, in different ways, the female body in terms of masculinity'. (p. 3) Secondly then, in relation to Neale's thesis, the stability of the gendered binary that was largely presupposed there is challenged. Not only can femininity be reinscribed in terms of masculinity, but masculinity can be inscribed in terms of femininity and its associated 'passivity'. Tasker remarks: 'unlike the active/passive division of labour . . . in which the male figure advances the narrative whilst the "woman" functions as spectacle, the male figure in the contemporary action picture often functions in both capacities'. (p. 16)

The fragmentation of the masculine leads Tasker to refer insistently to 'masculinities', so that 'Masculinity is written in complex and diverse ways over the male and female body, the black and the white body' (p. 96) and, as she rightly emphasizes, across the 'classed' body. In this way, the constitution of the subject as sexed and gendered intersects variously with its constitution as a subject of race and class. The Cohan and Hark collection is itself subtitled *Exploring Masculinities in Contemporary Hollywood* and the editors set its agenda as examining 'The male image on the cinema screen . . . from a variety of perspectives to look at its complexity, its historicity, and (as our subtitle recognizes) its multiplicity'. (p. 3)

This perspective is worked back into the question of masculinity and spectacle, so that there is suggested a differential construction of masculinity as spectacle. Ina Rae Hark, in a brilliant essay entitled

2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 47.

3 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Constructing Masculinity* Conference, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 22 April 1994.

'Animals or Romans: looking at masculinity in *Spartacus*', also pursues the multifarious construction of masculinity via a differential access to the gaze. A notion of the gaze here is generalized to a widespread configuration of power, so that 'if the structure of gender difference underwrites the economics of spectacularization, these practices nevertheless replicate themselves in many systems that operate through the empowerment of one group by another'. (p. 151) Hark pursues this perspective via Foucault's work on the form of control exercised in the discourses of institutional power. In this way, *Spartacus*'s elaborate narrative of spectacle and power produces, for Hark, fissures in a stable notion of masculinity: the dialectic of owners and slaves – 'class difference at its most extreme' (p. 152) – excludes slaves 'from the subject positions granted their gender in the scopic and economic regimes of patriarchy'. (p. 152)

The point for both Hark and Tasker is clearly not to deny gendered relations of power but, it seems, to delineate a configuration of power within which masculinity itself is imbricated. Tasker then speaks of a 'denaturalization of masculinity and its relation to power'. (p. 129) This perspective is undoubtedly predicated on recent developments in feminist theory where questions about differences of race, class and sexuality between women have served to dismantle the category of Woman as a homogenous and internally consistent whole. All three texts under review here are similarly concerned with an analysis of the masculine that approaches it as a less monolithic and historically homogenous essence, and they then generally pursue an analysis that sees masculinity as an unstable nexus of social and political phenomena. The main point to emerge from this is the problematization of the relationship between masculinity and power, a point made forcefully by Robyn Wiegman in an essay in *Screening the Male* entitled 'Feminism, "The Boyz", and other matters regarding the male'. Wiegman draws explicitly on contemporary feminist theory in delineating the construction of the African-American male, 'who in his relation of sameness to the masculine and in his threatening difference to the primacy of white racial supremacy . . . is stranded between the competing – and at times overdetermining – logics of race and gender'. (p. 174) In this way, the relation to privilege and power is complexly structured across masculinity, suggesting for Wiegman the difficulties in maintaining unified and disengaged readings of the structure and function of race, class, sexuality and gender.

Wiegman suggests that 'the logic of the gaze as the primary articulatory mechanism around which sexual difference is understood as encoded in filmic production needs to be suspended, so that other formations of gender (and other deployments of the discourse of sexual difference) can be more fully explored'. (p. 180) In this way Wiegman endorses Jane Gaines's project of reframing 'the question

- 4 Jane Gaines, 'White privilege and looking relations: race and gender in feminist film theory', *Cultural Critique*, no. 4 (1986), pp. 59–79, quoted by Wiegman, p. 178.
- 5 See also Miriam Hansen's work on the historical construction of a male gaze within the cinema in *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Cinema* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991).

of male privilege and viewing pleasure as the "right to look",⁴ a right that is structured across masculinity and across history.⁵ It seems that Hark's usage of Foucault is one way in which this project might be advanced.

Neale's essay had marked out an interest in genre, star image and masculinity that is pursued in much of the work here. Paul Smith's *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* might also be situated in the context of this tripartite focus. The text presents a loose narrative of Eastwood's career which is partly chronological and partly dictated by questions of genre. In some ways the book resembles a series of essays, sketching out a variety of issues circling around the constitution of Eastwood's image. There is, though, sustained emphasis within this on the circulation of meaning around Eastwood and the wider culture, a circulation that centres for Smith on the 'cultural process that goes towards the construction of what we might call the "meaning of Clint Eastwood"'. (pp. 255–6) This meaning is largely pursued by Smith in relation to Eastwood's presence as 'among the most readily visible icons of masculinity in North American culture'. (pp. 151–2) The text is then to some extent a critical genealogy of this 'meaning' and of the production of 'a particular male imaginary'. (p. 140)

This genealogy is traced through Eastwood's work with Leone, with Siegel, the setting up of his own production company, his own directorial efforts and his more recent construction as what Smith terms an 'auteur-father'. (pp. 243–63) For Smith, the cultural production of Eastwood is a process of oscillation between, on the one hand, the actual film texts and their generic status and, on the other hand, the 'cotextual histories that constitute the culture in which these films are both manufactured and consumed'. (p. 54) Pursuing this dialectic involves a mixing of registers across textual analysis, consideration of genre, cinematic history and 'cotextual history'. For example, in the first three chapters – 'Subaltern spaghetti', 'Genre', and 'Restitution' – Smith puts forward a reading of Leone's 'spaghetti Westerns' as a subaltern challenge to the dominance of the Western genre by the USA, and then a narrative of generic restitution via Eastwood's US Westerns, 'a righting the wrongs that Leone had seemed to have done to the genre'. (p. 25) This process of generic restitution is carried out alongside a form of re-Oedipalization within the film texts so that a disavowal of the threat of the 'minorities' comes to centre upon a re-establishment of the rights of paternity of the all-powerful white figure in relation to the West, to the genre, and to history more generally. It is in this way that Smith's complex and fascinating argument traverses the registers of text, genre, star image, cinematic and 'cotextual' history.

The safeguarding of the community by an all-powerful white male figure, central to this process of generic restitution, is for Smith a more widespread structure within Hollywood narratives – what he

refers to as 'the vigilante position'. (p. 98) However, in a way somewhat similar to Tasker's reading of the built male star as both triumphant assertion of masculinity and hysterically parodic performance, Smith outlines the underside of what Neale termed the 'phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery and control', seemingly exemplified by a figure such as Eastwood. This is fitted into a narrative of Eastwood's films, so that after *Dirty Harry* (1971) there begins 'a narrative of Eastwood's dealings with sexuality and violence, or with masculinity and its vicissitudes, that carries across many of his subsequent films' (p. 122) which themselves often 'stand as somewhat troubled presentations or investigations of the kind of (or the image of) masculinity that they popularly stand for'. (p. 153) In the chapter 'Eastwood bound' Smith pursues this 'troubling' of masculinity via work on male masochism, primarily with reference to the work of Kaja Silverman, Leo Bersani and Gaylyn Studlar. This seems again to fit into a problematization of the conflation of masculinity and power: masochism is read in this work – and also in a number of essays in the Cohan and Hark collection within the subsection 'Men in women's places' – as a structure that, in Freud's words, places the masculine 'in a situation characteristic of womanhood' (quoted by Smith p. 174). This complication of a nexus of masculinity and power then generally proceeds through a consideration of masculinity that is ostensibly beyond or before power, either via some form of association with femininity or via a deferral of the symbolic and then a 'subversive' refusal of the phallic identity associated with accession to the symbolic.

Smith complicates this project, however. In relation to action movies and Westerns in general, he discerns an orthodox structuring code based on a threefold representation of the male body: a passage through the eroticization of the male image, its destruction via punishment or testing, and its reemergence and regeneration. (p. 156) Eastwood is interesting for Smith precisely in the potential for some form of masochistic 'refusal', in his lingering 'much longer than most other popular cultural narratives in the rather special or peculiar state of gratification that comes of recognizing the factitious nature of the ultimate solution, and in doing so to exhibit the symptoms of what lies behind this gratification'. (p. 154) But this moment is insistently renarrativized as Eastwood's texts proceed, even if only perfunctorily, to a moment of regeneration. It is here where Smith's important critique of masochism operates: a masochistic refusal of the symbolic becomes only a momentary deferral, 'the masochistic trope must be no more than a temporary test of the male body' (p. 162), and then, 'masochism's "negativity"' is largely a functional catalyst in a formulaic narrative of erotic gratification. . . . The rules of masochism are, then, primarily metaphorical, and the game is played out unquestioningly in the thrall of the symbolic'. (pp. 164–6)

6 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

Neale, writing before the proliferation of work on masochism, had outlined a similar perspective in referring to action narratives as 'a drama in which power and omnipotence are tested and qualified'. Masochism is not simply beyond power: if it is, as Smith suggests, played out in the thrall of the symbolic, then it does not – as Silverman suggests – say no to power but is instead part of power's self-amplification.⁶ This is not to say that masculinity and power are coterminous. For example, in the chapter 'Burlesque Body' Smith presents a reading of the orang-utan Clyde in Eastwood's films *Every Which Way But Loose* (James Fargo, 1978) and *Any Which Way You Can* (Buddy Van Horn, 1981) as 'the hysterical body that resides with the heroic body as its other, continually reminding the heroic body of the powerlessness with which and within which it must operate'. (p. 180) This reading is at times unstably present within Smith's text, but I stress it here because it seems to me that it problematizes a certain, I think dominant, way of approaching masculinity as variously 'in crisis'.

Within much of the work here there is generally a dual focus to this notion of masculinity in crisis: there is attention paid to a subjective crisis, a problematization of the attainment of masculine subjectivity which is generally linked to some conception of a more widespread historical 'crisis' such as the development of feminism, shifts in the relation of masculinity to production, and so on. For example, Lucy Fischer's essay in *Screening the Male* entitled 'Mama's boy: filial hysteria in *White Heat*' reads World War II as a widespread problematization of 'sexual roles' which in turn produces a hystericization of masculinity. But this perspective seems to me structurally predicated on a conception of a prior moment of stability, a moment when 'masculinity' was fixed and unproblematic. Such a moment is hard to find, in this collection at least. Gaylyn Studlar has an interesting essay on Valentino's star image in the 1910s and 1920s, read alongside a broader ideological framework marked by the growing of female economic and sexual emancipation and, alongside this, Valentino's 'violation of a functional, work-centred American masculinity'. (p. 35) Adam Knee's essay on Eastwood's *Play Misty for Me* (1971) reads the film in relation to 'a time when American discourses regarding the masculine were being destabilized'. (p. 87) For Tasker, the 1980s are a moment when masculinity 'was put into question' (p. 1); and essays by Chris Holmlund, Helen W. Robbins and, extending into the 1990s, Susan Jeffords, put forward similar perspectives. Here then is the problem: crisis exists wherever you want to look for it, stretching across (at least) the history of narrative cinema. When is masculinity not a question? How does one date the moment it enters the realm of the questionable? Where is the moment of stability from which a variously related moment of crisis deviates?

The perspectives put forward by these writers do suggest, I think,

the potential for moving beyond this perspective. It again returns to a question of power: if power is conceptualized as a denial of those identifications or those 'moments' of subjectivity 'beyond' the dominant conception of masculinity, then any moment when this arises – and it clearly does so frequently – is a challenge to that power structure. Here is where masculinity would enter crisis. But this is a crisis – a game – played out unquestioningly in the thrall of power. This is a spiral of mastery and failure. Cohan and Hark offer a similar perspective to this in their brief but informative introduction to *Screening the Male*, pursued firstly via a critique of film theory that has historically equated masculinity with power and sadism, not, as they argue, that masculinity 'drives the representational system and its institutional apparatus only by being disabled'. (p. 2) Secondly, they ask 'what are we to make of a masculinity that can preserve its hegemony only by confessing its anxieties at every turn?' (p. 2)

To focus on the confession of these anxieties seems at times to be undertaken with an implicit understanding of what 'masculinity' is, a notion of an ontological specificity to masculinity prior to its discursive articulation or its being 'put into question/crisis'. As is evident in some of the very useful work here, this is to be avoided: masculinity is fragmentary, a performance, caught up variously in differing discourses, so that masculinities exist in complex and contradictory ways with regard to various configurations of power.

review:

***Cinémaction*, no. 67 (1993), 200pp. 'Vingt ans de théories féministes sur le cinéma', eds Ginette Vincendeau and Berenice Reynaud**

CHRIS HOLMLUND

Twenty years after Laura Mulvey's original presentation of 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', the first collection of Anglo-American feminist film theory has been published in France as an issue of *Cinémaction*. Edited, and for the most part also translated, by two French women who live and work outside France (in Britain and the US respectively), *Vingt ans de théories féministes sur le cinéma* thoughtfully assembles and excerpts thirty essays from two decades of writing by women academics, journalists and/or directors.

This said, however, two questions arise, both triggered by the fact that I am reviewing this issue for *Screen* as opposed to, for example, *Cahiers du cinéma* or *Iris*. First, if you know both English and French, why acquire a collection of essays originally written in English? Second, if you read English but not French, why even read a review about a volume of translations? Let me begin with the second question, because the answers here provide an economic and historical context for the responses I will give to the first.

The significance of Vincendeau's and Reynaud's collection lies first and foremost in its facilitation of crosscultural exchange between the US, Britain and France. While Anglo-American film theory has been greatly influenced by French film theory, literary criticism and philosophy, the reverse has not been true of French film theory. Anglo-American *feminist* film theory is particularly invisible in France, in part because, as Monique Martineau points out in her editorial introduction to this issue, French feminism itself

- 1 Alice Jardine and Anne Menke (eds), *Shifting Scenes: Interviews on Women, Writing and Politics in Post-68 France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

- 2 Pierre Daninos, *Major Thompson Lives in France and Discovers the Frenchmen*, trans. Robin Farn (Oxford: Alden Press, 1955), pp. 32–3.

is in crisis. How much French feminists must struggle to speak and survive emerges more clearly elsewhere; for example in Alice Jardine's and Anne Menke's *Shifting Scenes*.¹ But in *Vingt ans de théories féministes sur le cinéma*, Martineau rightly signals that, in contrast to the publishing boom feminist film theory has enjoyed in the USA and Britain, since the 1976 *Paroles, elles tournent* little on the subject has been published in France: aside from the occasional article, there is only the issue of *Cinémaction* Martineau edited (*Le Cinéma au féminisme* [no. 9, 1979]), Francoise Audé's *Cine-modèles, cinéma d'elles* (1981), Emile Breton's *Femmes d'images* (1984), and Paule Lejeune's *Le Cinéma des femmes* (1987).

How successful *Cinémaction*'s importation of Anglo-American feminist film theory to France will be is, of course, difficult to predict. For, although sexism is certainly a key factor, it is not the only factor: as I mention above, the balance of intellectual trade remains unequal where men, too, are concerned. Already in 1943, humourist Pierre Daninos explained that the French are unenthusiastic about outside ideas because, as they see it, 'la belle France' has only two possibilities:

To dominate the world by her radiance. . . . Or to be invaded and conquered. Persecuted by her enemies who make war, by her allies who make peace behind her back, by the whole world which steals her inventions (the French invent only to complain the next minute their inventions have been stolen) . . . [t]his state of continual menace in which (the Frenchman – *sic*) believes he is cornered mobilizes him into a permanent condition of self-defence.²

In a context in which the intellectual franc so consistently overpowers the intellectual pound and dollar (*pace* Jerry Lewis), therefore, my first question – why someone who reads both French and English would want to read, in French, articles originally written in English – acquires greater weight. It is, in effect, quite possible that Vincendeau's and Reynaud's anthology will find as many readers in the US, Britain, and elsewhere as in France.

Certainly there are several reasons why those who know both English and French will be interested in the collection. Vincendeau's and Reynaud's editorial comments are instructive, and their use of illustrations to extend, not just echo, the articles is intriguing. Most importantly, however, their collection is a valuable resource because although some articles are readily available in English (for example, Laura Mulvey's 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', Claire Johnston's 'Women's cinema as countercinema', Constance Penley's 'Feminism, film theory and the bachelor machines'), others are harder to find (Julia Lesage's '*Céline et Julie vont en bateau*: subversive fantasm', bell hooks's 'A black woman returns to cinema', Rosalind Coward's 'Madonna and Marilyn: do sex symbols

3 Titles and quotations have been translated from French back to English throughout this review. Apologies to those cited if my translations do not correspond with the original wording.

have a sell-by date?').³ A few essays appear here for the first time (Anne Friedberg's 'Women outside of (cinema) history' and Yvonne Tasker's 'Criminals: *Thelma and Louise* and other female delinquents'). Many selections are excerpted from books, including from Miriam Hansen's *Babel and Babylon*, Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures*, Tania Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, Lucy Fischer's *Shot/Countershot*, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's *To Desire Differently*, and Michele Wallace's *Invisibility Blues*.

In their introductions to the four major sections ('Looks and differences', 'Images and pleasures', 'Re-visions of history', 'The author in the feminine'), Vincendeau and Reynaud ably chart the currents and crosscurrents within Anglo-American feminist film theory, especially as they have swirled and eddied around psychoanalysis and Hollywood cinema. Femininity, female genres, women stars (Madonna, Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot) and women directors (Dorothy Arzner, Agnès Varda, Kathryn Bigelow, Susan Seidelman) are focal points, although a few selections also explore masculinity, male directors, male spectators and/or male stars (for example, Tania Modleski on Hitchcock, Rey Chow on Chen Kaige, Michele Wallace on Spike Lee, Miriam Hansen and Ella Shohat on Valentino).

Most of the more recent articles are concerned with historical and audience analysis, rendering the division between sections two ('Images and pleasures') and three ('Re-visions of history') somewhat artificial. After all, as Vincendeau indicates in her introduction to the section on history, the feminist attack on the cinema 'fortress' is currently being waged on three fronts: (1) against the 'history of cinema . . . largely written by men and . . . even if not overtly concerned with sexual difference, nevertheless reveal[ing] masculine points of view and misogynist prejudices';⁴ (2) for a revalorization of women's genres; and (3) for a revision of the historical 'object', following methodologies elaborated by French 'new history' and British cultural studies.

Throughout the issue, Vincendeau's and Reynaud's skilful juxtaposition of voices brings out the complexities of current feminist approaches to film history in ways a single-authored book could not. Miriam Hansen's study of how Valentino appealed to male and female audiences from differing ethnic and racial backgrounds is an excellent example of how sophisticated feminist scholarship has become, as is Linda Williams's insistence that the lesson of *Mildred Pierce* is 'neither the eternal repression of the feminine nor its realist reflection, but very specific forms of repression and reflection, which change historically and work together'.⁵ Giuliana Bruno retheorizes the pleasures of the cinema spectator in light of 'the collective, nomadic and historical dimension of the reception of films'.⁶ Vincendeau provocatively suggests that the hostility of French women to Brigitte Bardot's kittenish sexuality

4 Ginette Vincendeau, 'Assaulting the fortress', pp. 98–9.

5 Linda Williams, 'Mildred Pierce, the Second World War and feminist film theory', p. 120.

6 Giuliana Bruno, 'Promenade around Plato's cave', p. 136.

7 Ginette Vincendeau, 'The old and the new: Brigitte Bardot in the fifties', p. 142.

8 Examples include Jackie Stacey's 'Desperately seeking difference', Elle Shohat's 'Gender and culture of Empire: toward a feminist ethnography of cinema', Jacqueline Bobo's 'The Color Purple: black women as cultural readers', and more.

9 Trinh Minh-ha, 'Images and politics', p. 165.

10 Jackie Buet, 'Foreword: women and the image', p. 13.

'be understood not in terms of Puritanism (the traditional explanation), but in terms of [their] consciousness of the distance between the proposed – and certainly *desired* – image and lived experience':⁷ 1950s French women lacked the rights to contraception and abortion.

Each section includes essays opposed to the valorization within psychoanalysis of sexual difference as *the* difference;⁸ and the positioning of Judith Mayne's 'Dorothy Arzner, women and auteur politics' and June Givanni's and Reynaud's 'Images of black women' as the final two selections clearly indicates how seriously Vincendeau and Reynaud themselves take such challenges. My only wish is that there had been room to include other kinds of difference as well: articles on documentary film and video, more essays about experimental and independent work, articles on other mainstream film genres like horror and the Western; and, last but not least, feminist film theory written in other languages about other national cinemas.

Especially for those who read only French, therefore, I hope that there will soon be more journal issues devoted to feminist film theory, and several translations of books by feminist film critics. In the meantime, Vincendeau's and Reynaud's collection stands as a splendid example of what Trinh Minh-ha terms 'responsible feminist work': 'work which, on the one hand, shows political engagement and ideological lucidity, and, on the other, essentially constitutes an interrogation, rather than being a simple prescription'.⁹ As much as any one collection can, *Vingt ans de théories féministes sur le cinéma* thereby helps answer the call Jackie Buet, director of the Créteil Women's Film Festival, makes 'for a cinema with eyes open':¹⁰ a cinema in which constraints and conventions are recognized at the same time as parameters are redefined.

review:

Ann Gray, *Video Playtime: the Gendering of a Leisure Technology*. London: Routledge (Comedia), 1992, 269pp.

Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 236pp.

CHARLES SHIRO TASHIRO

In one of those coincidences that suggest either happy accident or a shift in academic direction, these books, released within a short time of one another, start with nearly identical concerns: to investigate the introduction of a technology into the domestic environment.

Both books can be broadly described as taking a 'cultural studies' approach to their topics (the use of the VCR in Britain for Gray, the introduction of television into US homes for Spigel), particularly as related to gender. But Gray, interested in the 'gendering' of a technology, relies on contemporary interviews to understand the dynamics at work in the use of the VCR. Spigel, writing some thirty years removed from the events described, takes a 'textual', or more properly 'intertextual' approach to her subject, examining a multitude of sources in order to construct an image of the postwar American's feelings about a new and unfamiliar object.

This difference, which might be described grossly as the difference between sociology and history, is critical to both arguments. Gray, writing a more or less contemporary account, can assume a degree of identity with her subjects, a texture of shared events and attitudes which are questioned only as a deliberate strategy on the part of the sociologist. An interviewer conducting a survey in her own country about the present or recent past does not have to worry about the strangeness that sets in with the passage of time. An historian, on the other hand, will always be outside her subject in a way a

sociologist can be only when examining an alien culture. She may fall in love with her subject, but the affection remains unreturned since the period investigated remains dead, distanced. Time provides for the historian the intellectual 'objectivity' ideological training gives the sociologist.

For example, Ann Gray can assume a degree of feminist consciousness, or at least consciousness of feminism, with which both she and her subjects are familiar. This familiarity allows her to recognize when her subjects are answering in a way they think she wants to hear. This recognition, in turn, frees Gray to apply her own educational experience and theoretical sophistication to the responses, to reveal the ideology unconsciously expressed. Lynn Spigel, on the other hand, by writing a history, must grope for a lost object, exercising circumspection with each conclusion, aware that she can never understand the period, events or texts as an insider. As a result, she tends more to narrativize the complexity she uncovers, making less explicitly ideological arguments, embodying her argument through the form her writing takes.

Which is not to suggest that Spigel's book lacks ideological sophistication, or that Gray's is difficult to read. Quite the contrary: both, in different ways, are models of breadth and lucidity. Gray, for example, very thoroughly maps out her interests, approach and the motivating rationale behind both. Where it might have been tempting to resort to abstruse theoretical argument she instead discusses concisely, never hiding her ideological project, but also justifying the attention through force of argument. For example, her early discussion of the problems of essentializing on the issue of gender are as forthright and powerful as one could ask:

. . . I stand guilty on this count . . . [but] insist that as long as our use of categories and indeed theoretical frameworks is sensitive to the particular research context, to our own political agenda and research practice, the social categories can and must allow us to say something about the wider social and cultural networks of power. (p. 30)

What is striking about this statement is less its ideological awareness than the frank admission that the author knows she is using that awareness for her *own* agenda.

Spigel's book impresses differently: for the widely ranging field of view, the active openness to new and unique data and the analytical skill in tying together disparate pieces of evidence. It is difficult to resist any narrative that successfully brings together Edward Bellamy, 1950s domestic architecture, *The Organization Man* and *Texaco Star Theater*. Spigel excels at heightening understanding through striking juxtaposition, exposing relationships and similarities never before suspected. In the 'Trouble in Paradise' subsection of Chapter Two, for example, Spigel jumps from *House Beautiful*, to

Popular Mechanics to Jean Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and back to *House Beautiful* in a way that impresses not as superficial flitting from mountaintop to mountaintop, but instead as a relentlessly logical and appropriate approach to the topic.

At the same time, these books could not be as good as they are without raising serious questions. For example, Gray's forthright admission to feminist interest is admirable. But as a result, the men in Gray's book never express themselves, they are only expressed by their spouses, girlfriends, mothers or daughters. In itself, this perspective need not be a problem, except that their self-expression seems strangely lacking given that Gray wants to show how the VCR became a *male* technology. Her use of the work of Pierre Bourdieu is illuminating in this regard, since it points to both the best and the most problematic aspects of her study. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital', a person's degree of cultural sophistication derived from education, Gray tries both to use Bourdieu's ideas and to demonstrate their limitations, refracting his ideas through a gendered prism.

In so doing, she is able to reveal limitations to Bourdieu's theory, while providing insight into feminist issues. For example, she notes that women with a higher measure of cultural capital tend to share with their educated male partners a taste for 'quality' texts which distinguish them as culture consumers from the popular, while working-class men share with their educated male counterparts a distaste for 'feminine' genres. Yet her concluding statements are disarmingly familiar:

We can see that the least contradictory subject is the educated, middle-class male whose sense of self-control marks his masculine subjectivity and his aesthetic disposition. (p. 252)

The problem with this statement is not its content but its predictability. It is difficult to imagine beginning with Bourdieu and not concluding that social class has an effect on taste. When Bourdieu is viewed through feminist glasses, it is equally difficult to imagine their tint not colouring the conclusion. As a result, Gray arrives at the not very surprising conclusion that privileged men occupy a position of privilege by being men.

The circularity of this argument suggests that the empirical evidence supplied by the thirty women interviewed is ultimately unnecessary. Gray could have reached much the same conclusion without them. But of course, the interviews provide the testimony of a pure witness. Since Gray's subjects have no personal investment in Bourdieu's theories, they can be selected as impartial proof of an argument which admits no contradiction. Gray is frankly interpretive of her subjects' responses (and tends to gloss over contradictions to her generalizations when they do appear, such as one woman's taste

for horror films). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that she finds what she is looking for, since the shapers of her interpretation, Bourdieu and feminist theory, have trained her to look for the evidence that will support their arguments.

We do not have to have a naive faith in statistics, pointing to the small size of Gray's sample, to question the results of such a survey. We must merely remain sceptical about the prospect of essentializing a technology with a gendered label on the weight of limited evidence. Gray, and other authors relying on empirical method for this kind of research, are stuck on the horns of a dilemma. While recognizing the fallacies of quantitative research, they nonetheless seem to want to move beyond the opinions of the isolated theorist. The result is a kind of hybrid: theory presented in the clothes of impartial evidence, interpreted by the author to reveal a deeper truth. But of course that truth confirms an opinion that exists *before* the research. The results can be rewarding (and certainly Gray's book should be required reading for anyone interested in technology related issues). But they are ultimately as limited as a bald opinion without empirical support.

Lynn Spigel's book suffers from a different methodological dilemma. Her self-described 'intertextual, dialogical' approach to her subject allows for a rich tapestry of historical incident and evidence. And she demonstrates a consistent attention to the contradictions and fissures in much of her advertising 'evidence'. For example, describing a 1952 advertisement for Airfoam furniture which depicts a dozing man before a television set, she notes:

. . . the man's pleasure in television is associated with passive relaxation. The woman's pleasure, however, is derived from the aesthetics of a well-kept home and labor-saving devices that promise to minimize the extra household work that television brings to a domestic space . . . the Airfoam is typical as it depicts a female body that finds no viewing pleasures of its own but instead functions to assist with the viewing comforts of others. (p. 94)

This kind of attention to detail, exercised over a wide range of texts, leads to some fascinating observations, such as

. . . the graphic representation of the female body viewing television had to be carefully controlled. It had to be made appealing to the eye of the observer, for in a fundamental sense, there was something taboo about the sight of a woman watching television. In fact, the housewife was almost never shown watching television by herself. (p. 95)

But how typical are these examples? Since the majority of advertisements she examines are from women's magazines, Spigel's results are inevitably skewed. A 'control' text from either a

male-oriented or gender neutral magazine would help to determine how much the analyzed advertising results from a particular venue and how much it represents a general cultural image. While Spigel refers occasionally to such journals, a more consistent juxtaposition might have alleviated suspicion that the argument results more from a selective sample than from cultural trends.

Besides, even granting the obvious interpellative function of advertising, how susceptible were consumers to these messages? If we grant that advertising images contain contradictory and alternative meanings, an assumption integral to the intertextual approach, how valid is one 'reading' of an advertisement over another? If an advertisement can be read in completely contradictory fashion, what does that say about its ability to construct the consumer? Where does the consumer's capacity for denial and resistance set in, and how can that be measured? We can posit plausible interpretations to these texts, but ultimately the person making a decision to buy remains a mystery, someone to be explained, described, characterized by the author, who thereby recoups authority as the person weaving the tapestry.

If Gray's book suffers from a certain theoretical hermeticism, the same arguments and conclusions circling about in self-confirmation, her interviews nonetheless provide something lacking in Spigel's book: the evidence of individual responses. This lack is noticeable since Spigel's goal is not to use textual analysis for its own sake, but as a tool in (re)constructing the (presumably female) viewer's self-image. While Spigel does not provide a naively reflectionist analysis, neither does her discussion, graced with poststructuralist sophistication, ultimately give a particularly convincing notion of individual response. And with good reason: textual evidence gathered from a number of sources can do very little to construct a personal image. It is most useful in constructing a *general* notion of the past.

Therefore, Spigel's history of the introduction of television works best as a description of the object when it arrived at the door. It suggests some of the factors that might have motivated purchase; it helps in understanding the 'cultural coding' that would have been attached to the set. But it fails as a description of personal response, since people are notably lacking as anything other than fragmentary evidence. Gray's book, on the other hand, excels as a theoretically informed description of a detailed set of responses to a new technology which remains more or less as given at the book's start. There is little attention to the contradictions of the VCR as a cultural object, nor to the textual complexities of the programming it delivers. Thus despite their similar ambitions, these books end up complementing each other where they differ most.

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